Mike Connor: Guide Dog

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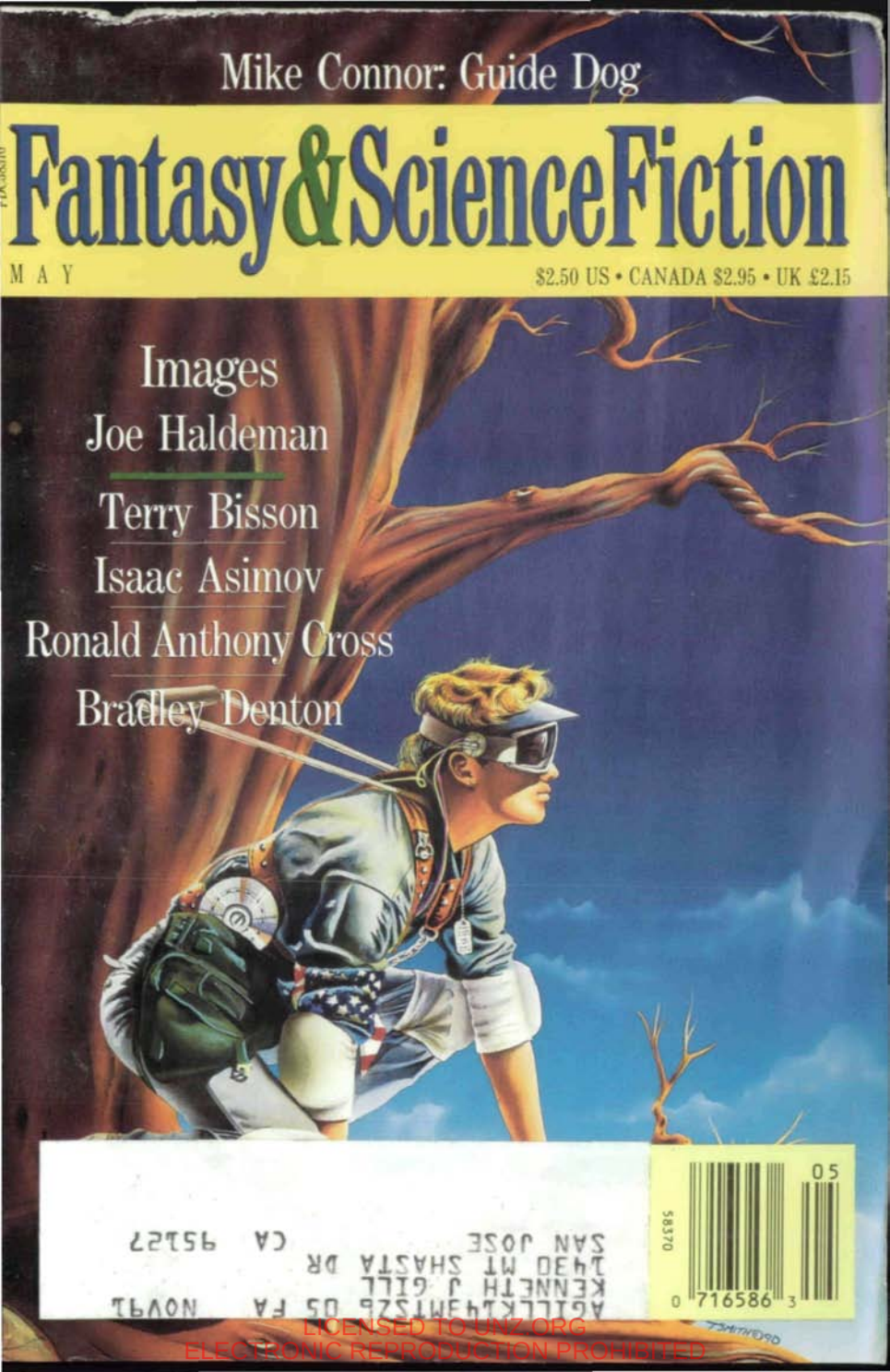

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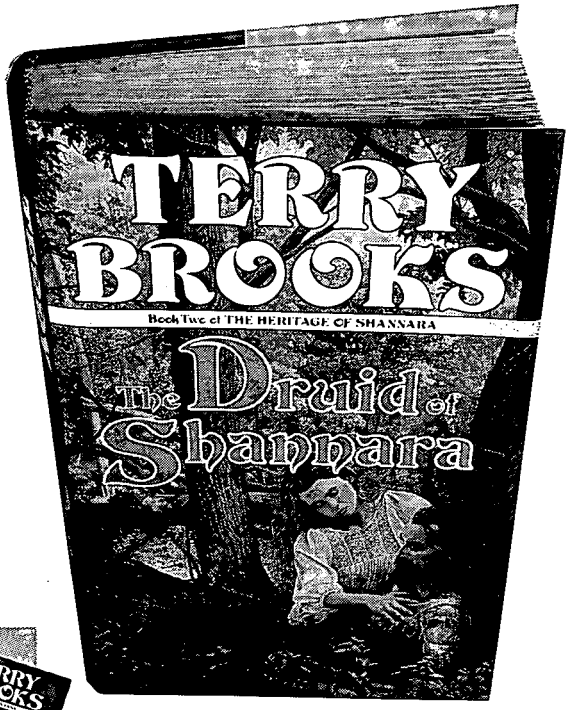

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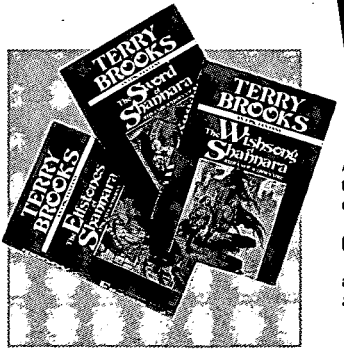

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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Mike Conner wrote several distinctive stories for F&SF some years ago, including "Stillborn," (March 1982) and "Five Mercies," (March 1984). His new story is about a young human who is trained into a kind of benign servitude on a strange world, and it is a very different and very moving tale.

GUIDE DOG

By Mike Conner

WHEN I WAS FOURteen years old, my parents sold me. I don't blame them for it. They got a lot of money for me. Mom and Dad ran an import company, and they were at a disadvantage because, while they were never big enough to compete, they always did just well enough to keep from going under. And they had another son to worry about that they could not sell yet. So the contract was a good thing for the family.

The night I left, Dad cried and said that when I turned twenty-five and had worked off the term, I could come home, and he would pay me back every cent. I told him he didn't have to do that. I was at the age where you don't care much about leaving home, anyway. So, one morning in December, Dad drove me over to the compound in the old vegetable truck. His eyes were still red, but he wasn't crying anymore. He told me to be careful in town, pay attention to my teachers, and wash all the fruits and vegetables I ate. I thought he ought to know about that because he

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imported food, so I thanked him and said I would see him in about ten years. He gave me a tiny blue pocketknife then that had a fingernail file in it and a pair of scissors. I still had that knife until last night. It was so small they never believed I could actually use it as a weapon. It was the last thing Dad ever gave me, and I stood turning it over with one hand and waving good-bye with the other.

At first I missed the folks. Anybody with half a heart misses their family no matter how awful they are. But the Academy had developed plenty of ways to make you forget about them. They got you busy with the academic stuff, and they put you in the social program, too. They arranged your rooms and your classes to put you with people they calculated you would get along with. They wanted you to fall in love as soon as possible. It didn't matter with whom. Here you were, lonely as hell, and they gave you a roommate, also lonely, and they look the other way and hand you every opportunity, so how could you resist? Then, when you thought you were set all right, they fix it so one of you moves up a class or transfers out to another dorm. So you moan and groan and then look around and find somebody new. Somehow it ate up whole years.

Eventually, though, you passed your exams and got a chance to see what you were there for. Like everything else, it was pretty much sink or swim (though after three years they were pretty certain about who would sink and who could do the swimming). What they did was take you out early in the morning into the Tree. They landed you on top and said all you had to do was make it back to the gate of the Academy. No time limit. No life or death. If you freaked, you could call in on a beeper, and they'd pick you up, and you were free to try again as many times as you wanted. But everyone knew getting to that gate meant getting out of school. And after three years of being jacked around, manipulated, and otherwise educated, there wasn't anybody who wasn't ready for that.

I know I was. I'd spent hours studying the tapes and maps. I'd put on phones and gotten used to the noise they made. I knew all the best routes to take on foot, and how to ask for directions and read the answers from the little dances they did. I had a pack of food and a list of districts in the Tree where our people were allowed to work or live. So when they came for me, I thought it would not be a problem. They flew me in and let me out directly at the top of the Tree.

Oh my! The perches at the top are narrow and wind-worn slick,

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rounded like branches; and even cleated, gum-soled slippers and practice on the balance beams couldn't prepare you for the sheer power of thousands of them swarming by, wings buzzing — to say nothing of the way they turned their heads and panned their eyes when they looked at you, and how you thought they wanted you to fall, and then, and even worse, realized that they *didn't care* whether you fell or not, that you were nothing to them, while they were everything to each other. It was the emotion that was hard to take and still carry on the task of moving down. In spite of the perches and platforms, there were millions of places you could crash and fall through, bouncing down like a ball in a pachinko machine all the way to the ground.

My first five minutes up there, I slipped and hung, legs swinging onto a slippery perch, fighting a total despair that sapped the strength in my arms and made me want to let go. Then I told myself no, this is what you're up here for, to survive this, and it's the only way you'll ever see the end of that contract. *This is what you've been going to school for!* And so I swung my legs up and stood and spread my arms to keep the ones flying by off of me, and sure enough, they commenced to veer because their radar told them I had position. And I started picking and hopping my way down until I reached a fountain I remembered from the tapes, got myself oriented, and eventually made it back to the gates of the school. It took six and one-half hours. Later they said it was some kind of record. I don't know. It seemed to have lasted forever.

The next day they called me in and gave me an assignment in a nest.

A guide dog lives in a nest for two years. You continue your studies, but the idea is to learn all you can about how they live. At the end of the two years, you are supposed to be used to their ways. My nest lay about twenty miles outside the Tree, near a river. It was nice, lush country, with lots of flowers and paths that you could walk along and almost fool yourself into believing you were home — until a couple of them flew over.

The nest family is where you wear a harness for the first time. The harness is the mark of a guide dog. It is the means of communicating with your client. The word *client* is a hard one to get around. You want to learn to forget what you think you mean by the word, and try to really understand the concept of service. As a guide, your purpose is to help the client to live as normally as possible. In the nest, you learn not to feel

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ashamed of that, and to take pride in what you are and enjoy it. That way you can understand the kind of appreciation they give you in return. I admit this appreciation can be difficult to handle. However, you cannot live as a guide dog without it. It is as if you were a plant and had to learn to *appreciate* the light before you could grow and thrive.

I had a good nest. They had worked with the Academy for many years and had boarded many student guides, and they knew how to train us. They were an older nest, and lots of the kids were almost grown. With a nest, it is the kids who really do most of the teaching. They laugh at you when you first feel the thousands of tiny needles in the top of your back from the harness translator that turns their buzzing into shapes that you interpret as words. They demonstrate the body language. You make your first moves in a harness with the kids, too. They hold the grab bar and press their knees into the cups on either side of your hips. If they are old enough and strong enough, they fly with you, too, or try to. Sometimes you make it across the room. Sometimes you crash and lie there in a heap, pushing and trying to untangle yourself just like you would with any other kid.

The biggest thing they teach you, though, is about the emotion. I'm talking about what you feel and what you have to go through if they accept you even a little. In school they say it is possibly the result of a chemical reaction. They would. Anyone who's ever felt it knows that there is nothing chemical about it. It is a spiritual rush of love and gratitude that hits you so hard your toes curl. You think that you understand everything. You know it is all worth it, no matter what it is.

I remember when I felt it the first time. I was with one of the young ones, and we were playing a kind of catch game with a long scoop and a sticky ball. I made a move and caught one behind my back and flipped it right back at him, and he just stood there looking at me, his flat eyes shining like china. And it hit me so hard then I thought I would just burst with it.

Of course, once you feel it like that, you want to feel it again. That's why the Academy teaches you to channel your feelings. That feeling of belonging is what holds everything together for them. It pulls them in and keeps them healthy. *You*, however, are meant to have only a taste of it. That's how they put it at school. *Tasting.* When you feel it coming on, you're supposed to sidestep and take a taste. You must not let it get to

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you. That first time in the garden with the kid, I got in all the way, and I paid. Inside-out of that burning glow of belonging is black, empty desolation that hits even harder. It just about knocked me out for good. I was so down with it, I spent three days trying to figure out how I could kill myself with the little pocketknife Dad gave me. In the end, though, I came back, and from then on I was really careful. I made sure to take only a taste.

You get to know how much you can have, and I pushed that to the limit, but stayed safe. There were some who wanted more, though. They took all they could get, and built up a tolerance. They didn't care about the consequences. They were renegades. Eventually I would run into them.

By my second year with the family, I was doing pretty well. I got so I didn't feel the harness anymore, and the pictures pressed against my back turned easily into words and pictures in my head. I was fond of my nest. The father would take me out flying in the harness, and we got to be pretty good together. Of course, he could see, and his radar was sharp, so it was not like guiding him. But he helped me to figure out the traffic system and how they worked the right-of-way. The father told me I was the best dog that had ever come into his nest. *Dog.* That's how the harness translated their sound for what we were. He got emotional about it, too. I could feel it coming on, and got all cold inside and had just the smallest taste. I knew it was hard for him getting attached to a guide and then having to let go. It was hard for me, too. But that was the way it was.

A couple of days after the father paid me that compliment, the Director asked me to come around to his office. When I came in, he was sitting behind his desk wearing a pair of big glasses. Which was a good thing, because small eyes were starting to look strange to me.

"You've been an outstanding, outstanding student," the Director began.

"Thank you, sir."

"You could not ask anyone to do any more than you've done here." He was speaking emotionally. It always surprises me how we demonstrate emotion so visibly — eyes misting, voice trembling — with so little of the feeling coming through.

The Director began to clean his glasses. "We have been approached by

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the representative of a very, very special client. A very, very important personality in this world. We have never had an opportunity to serve someone of this stature until now. Fortunately, I believe we are ready to meet the challenge. I believe you are ready to guide. I believe you are the one person here who can guide this client." He put both his hands on my shoulders and looked deep into my eyes. "What do you say?"

I'll give it a shot," I said.

I called him Henry. Henry was an artist. By artist, I mean painter and sculptor. He was the most famous artist who had ever lived on their world. Part of the reason was that he was so old. He had lasted longer than all of his immediate relatives, and now he lived alone. That was the second reason for his fame. It was absolutely astonishing and incomprehensible to them that someone would *choose* to live alone. They were always asking him about it, and he always said that he did not live alone, but with anybody who had ever seen his work. But he did actually live alone, and that was a marvel to them.

The third reason Henry was so famous was that he was damned good. Maybe he flew around and spoke by buzzing and making little dances, and lived by chewing on the edges of big leaves — but Henry could flat out paint. His canvases were a kind of silky cloth stretched over various geometric frames, including rectangular ones. For as long as anyone could remember, he had covered them with beautiful pictures.

Henry was a great master, and would have been on *any* world. Unfortunately, old age had got him. He had gone blind. The big eyes were milky saucers now, and Henry could make out only rough shapes and distinguish light from dark. His sight had been failing a long time, but he had continued to paint. Then his radar went out on him, too. The feathery shoots above his head withered and curled, and Henry was in darkness and, for the first time, truly alone. But he was still strong. Henry had no intention of biding time in an old-age nest waiting to die. He had things to do! And so he had contacted the Academy, and the Academy had sent me to him.

I CALLED HIS house the Atelier, because that's what it was. It sat on a high bluff and had a magnificent view of the Tree, with its branches sparkling like the facets of a snow crystal. Inside, the rooms had enormously high ceilings and huge windows. There were four or five

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rooms for living and three for working. And in every corner were the paintings and sculptures.

Henry estimated he had done a quarter of a million pictures, not counting sketches, studies, painted-over first tries — to say nothing of the statues, prints, plaster casts, and the pen-and-ink drawings that were piled up everywhere. Henry was not very organized. Again, that was unusual for them because generally they are neat as pins. Not Henry. His carapace was covered with paint, some of it very old paint, layers like you get on the stair post of an old hotel. He never bothered cleaning it off. It was his trademark. He told me, though, that when he was young and just leaving the nest, his sloppiness had caused him a lot of hardship. He had trouble finding a job, or holding one when he did find it. It was the old story. The ones that don't fit in are the ones who try the hardest to make sense of everything. That is why you have pictures and books and plays and songs and everything else that isn't business or food. If you can't fit into the world, then you try and make it into a place that fits you.

When they brought me to the Atelier, the Director was there, cleaning his glasses and blowing his nose because of his allergies. They had a Minister of Education around. (And yes, they had all of it — government offices, places of business, places of worship, universities, just like we did. It was all organized differently, and not necessarily inside monumental buildings, but they had them, all right, as I was to discover.) There were reporters from their media, and some from ours. Our people took pictures and asked me how it felt to have such a heavy assignment, and the Director blew his nose and made eye contact with me, and I remembered to be polite and humble, though inside I was getting impatient with all the fuss. Finally they brought me inside, and there he was, standing in the middle of the first big room of the Atelier with his long hands in front of him, cocking his head a little because he didn't quite know what was going on. One of them went over to him — I found out later he was Henry's Business Manager — and buzzed something at him. Henry nodded and came forward and stood over me.

"What's up?" he said in English.

He must have been practicing a long time. It is very hard for them to make the sounds we use when we speak, but Henry just loved that expression. He told me once he thought it summed up his philosophy of

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life better than anything he could say in his own language. You see, "up" was just like right or left to them. But Henry figured out it had a greater meaning for us, in terms of escape and climbing and falling and trying and failing. Plus, he liked being able to make the sound. Anyway, that was when I felt the first wave coming from him. From that moment I loved Henry and everything about him.

I couldn't wait to get started. Finally, a couple of hours later, when they had taken their pictures and gathered in the scene at the Atelier for their media, and all the necessary documents had been executed by the Director and Business Manager, they left us alone. I helped Henry touch the grab bar.

"That's it," I said. The harness translated for me. He could still hear all right. "How are you?"

"Good," he replied. I could feel the needles tingling against my back.

"You understand me?"

"I believe I do."

"O.K.," I said. "Let's get to work."

They had given Henry a lot of training, too, I discovered. He had studied "Physiology of Dog" and "Psychology of Dog" and "History of Dog." He had tons of scrolls around on how to care for me, and Business Manager had hired a contractor to make me a perfect room. It was a pretty good try. But the result was a little like what happened when the committee of blind men described what an elephant looked like. Right in the middle of the room, for instance, they installed a commode that was big enough to swim in. And the bed was in the wall. I slept in the room only a couple of nights. Then I moved my bed into a shop that Henry had used for wood carving. He had not done much carving lately, but the shop still smelled like pine shavings. It was small, and I liked the smell and how the chips and sawdust felt under my feet.

Henry never asked why I had moved. He had a supreme ability to mind his own business. Again, that was so unusual for them, close-knit as they were, and completely lacking in anything that would correspond to our concept of tact or politeness. When I was with the nest, the kids all had to know everything I did and why and what for. Finally you got tired of the questions and told them to shut up. Even then they would ask you why, but not Henry. You had the feeling he knew you would tell him what he

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wanted to know without his ever having to ask.

Henry had been blind for around ten of our years. At first he accepted his condition with good humor and contented himself sculpting in clay and plastic. I have seen some of his pieces from this period, and they are graceful, rounded forms. He was good as ever, but he wanted more. He wanted his freedom back, and for that, he had to be able to fly. You must understand: flying is the one thing they do alone. And yet, by flying around, they become part of the Tree and of their world. In that respect, Henry was no different than the rest of them. Without flying, he was lonely.

Right away Henry and I began practicing in the big room of the Atelier. This room was the treasure-house of Henry's art. There were canvases of all sizes and shapes from his Blue and Orange Periods. He told me these "periods" were not solid blocks of time. When a "blue" mood came on, he would paint in those tones and in that style, and the historians and critics would assign the piece to the "Blue Period."

We spent hours in that room, and I went there when Henry was resting or out somewhere with Business Manager, just to look at all the stuff. There were hundreds of pieces, some of his most famous works, like "Waterfall at Night" and the "Huskers," that were familiar to anybody who liked art. And this was where we began to work with the harness. It was a little like playing handball in the Médicis room at the Louvre.

There were perches in the room spaced close so that we could handle the jumps without Henry having to fly very far. Henry took the bar, tucked his knees in a little as I looked back at him over my shoulder.

"Where to?" I said.

"You choose."

"You sure? I don't want you to fall."

"Who does?" Henry replied with vast amusement.

I made the first jump. They are very agile, and so strong and quick that he had no trouble reading the direction or the distance from the way my body shifted under his light pressure in the knee cups. He wasn't afraid. He trusted right away that my moves would be good. And sometimes we did fall, but Henry somehow always got his wings out in time. Right away I could tell we were a good team. And it wasn't long before we were using his wings for more than breaking a fall. Henry flew, riding the harness like a saddle, and I moved my body this way or that, and he would know when

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he had to turn, and how much or that he must slow and pull up and land. We flew to the top perches in the Atelier. It was a fatal fall to the floor from up there, but with Henry, I felt safe. We landed, and I stood there looking out at the Tree in the early evening, listening to the click of Henry's breastplates as they rose and fell. He was still a little out of shape for flying, and was breathing hard. But he was happy.

Then one day we went out. It was early morning, the sun up just long enough to burn off some of the mist, and there was plenty of traffic. The Tree looked like a bubble of boiling water, all misty at the edges with so many of them flying in and out. Henry let me collect myself for a long time. He must have been nervous, too. Finally I heard him come up behind me, and felt him take the grab bar.

"What's up?" he said.

I looked back at him. His head was cocked a little, and the clouded-over disks of his eyes looked like pearl buttons. I wondered what *was* up. I wasn't sure if I would have trusted someone to lead me around the room if I had been blind, much less fly.

"I'm ready," I said.

Henry tucked his knees in against me. I heard the dry scrape of his back plates as he unsheathed his wings. And then he sprang out easily, and we were off. He rolled, spiraling toward the Tree, and he was laughing, tumbling both of us through the air like a kid in a nest.

At first I didn't have much to do. Then we got closer to the Tree, and the traffic really got thick. They all had their radar going, and there was a tingling in the air from it that made the hair stand up on the back of your neck. But you had to forget about that and work with your eyes and your ears and your anticipation. It was like riding into a beehive, except the bees all weighed three hundred pounds. I ducked and turned and twisted the way I had been taught and in ways I had never dreamed of, and all the time Henry drove on, plunging straight through the avenues and dropping right into the core at the busiest time of the day. Nobody flew like we were flying now. We had fifty near misses and caused a dozen near accidents, and I was waiting for their cops to come after us. After a while I noticed they started to give way and pull up and watch when we went by. At first I thought it was just a lull in the traffic, but then I realized: *Word had gone around!* They knew that Henry was back. He had come back

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from the worst thing that could happen to one of them, and they wanted to see how he had done it.

All morning we flew. Then Henry asked me where we were in relation to certain landmarks of the Tree and began to guide *me*. We left the Tree and followed a deep canyon above a river for a while. The walls were slate and spalled off, and in the crevasses, twisted trees grew thickly wherever they could take root. The canyon grew deeper, and narrower, and a canopy of green covered the top, so that the light turned a dusky gray-green. By now you could hear the sound of a waterfall. Suddenly Henry pulled back on the harness, and we flew straight up, blasting through the foliage up to a wide ledge that was shaded by another layer of spreading branches and walled in by the canyon. I heard a buzz of activity. We landed on the ledge, and Henry caught a breath.

"What is this place?" I said.

"Well, I suppose you would call it a café," he said through the harness. "*Kaaff*," he repeated in his own voice.

I hesitated. It was one of their private places. They had clubs and the like, but we were never allowed near them.

"Do you think it's a good idea for me to go in? I mean, I can wait out here for you." Like a good dog, I thought.

"Don't be silly. I'm one of the owners. Maybe the only owner. The others may all be dead now."

He gave a little push on the harness, and I led him in. There were tables with long stone benches that were crowded with them. When they saw me, they all stopped talking. *They don't like us*, I thought. *We're nothing to them.* And then the place exploded because they realized it was Henry. They were all over him. He let them touch him, preen him, look at his eyes and withered stalks on his head. And then, holding the harness so I could understand, he told them all that he had flown here with my help. I felt the rush then, but I did not back too far away. After all, we were in a café.

They sat us down and brought Henry and me each a platter piled high with leaves and bowls of yellow mead fermented from flower nectar. Henry tore right into his, then he noticed that I wasn't eating. He got up, and I made out through the harness that he wanted some food for his friend. Someone went out and brought back a bowl of fruit and berries, so that I could eat with the rest. I was starving after all the flying, and I ate

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not caring if it was any good for me or not. I figured that if Henry could trust me to guide him while he flew, I could trust him not to poison me. As it happened, the fruit did contain some alkaloid dust in low concentration, so that soon I was singing along with them, and dancing on the tabletops, and Henry flew me around and let some of his friends have a turn with the harness, too. Henry taught them all how to say "dog," and they made up a song about it. Then Henry showed me some of his stuff that was hanging on the walls. Most of it was real old, done on boards with cheap paint that was already cracking. Henry described each one. They hadn't touched a thing since the last time he had been there.

The paintings were mainly landscapes or still lifes with a nature theme. One really got to me, though. It was of two of them, an adult and a child. The adult stood behind the child and looked down at him with his head bent. The child tilted his head and raised his eyes. There was just something about the way they looked at each other that reminded me of my own dad, and I started to cry. This caused a sensation. It had never occured to me that they would be sensitive to *my* emotions. In a moment they were all around me, stroking me and trying to get a little sample of my tears. I would have had to cry a river to supply them all. There was so much coming back from them that for a second I felt myself slipping away. That was when Henry stepped in. Firmly, he ordered everyone to get away from me. He made them be quiet and let me get myself together.

"What's up?" he said after I came around.

"It's the painting. Something about it makes me feel awfully sad — and happy, too, at the same time."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. It's an awfully good picture."

"Would you like it?"

"Oh, I couldn't. It belongs here."

"We'll give them another one. Would you like it? It would give me pleasure to give it to you."

"O.K.," I said.

He had them take it off the wall, and we took it with us when we left.

I put the painting up above my bed in the carving room. I liked the feeling it gave me when I looked at it. It was good to have a picture in the room where you could see it accidentally when coming in or getting out of

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bed in the morning. That was the way to see a painting. In museums, when you made a point of visiting them and stood around respectfully with a lot of other people, it was like gawking at animals in a zoo. It gave you an uneasy feeling because ordinarily you would never see animals that way. Paintings were made for money or to please the artist, not to be exhibited with a lot of other paintings. That's what I thought, anyway. I told it all to Henry one night, too.

"Is that your theory about art?" he asked.

I said it wasn't exactly a theory. It was more like an opinion. He cocked his head then because there was no exact translation for "opinion" in his language. After a while he sat back a little.

"You mean it is your idea," he said.

"That's about the size of it."

"The guide dog and I think alike," he said. "I wonder if we *see* alike."

I always liked to remind him how smart I was, and so I began explaining that my eyes had only one lens, while his had 256. But he stopped me.

"*See*," he said, tapping the plate on top of his head. "Inside. You look out through the door into the big room. Tell me what you see."

"The edge of that bench."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because the wood's split. I always wonder what made it split like that."

"Color?"

"Well, that changes, Henry. I can see it from my bed, you know. Sometimes — early in the morning if it's been raining, say — the wood looks gray and brown together with a little blue. *Vast*, I'd call it.

"Vast?"

"What the light looks like inside a big church when the sun isn't shining through the windows. That's what I mean."

"Vast," Henry repeated.

He didn't say any more, but went out and left me alone. I read a book for a while, and then wrote a letter to my folks. I told them not to feel too proud about my assignment. I suppose they had a right to feel proud, but I didn't want them bragging about me. I wrote that I was lucky to get in with Henry, but that when you got right down to it, I was working off my contract just like anybody else. I tried not to be too blunt. But it is not a

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bad thing every once in a while to remind someone gently of the things they have done to you. There are plenty of ways to say such things without using the actual words. After dozens of letters to my family, I was still finding new ones all the time.

I FINISHED THE letter and sent it off into the link, and then I wandered around the Atelier looking for Henry. I found him out on the back terrace. He was sitting in his net chair, working his jaws on the end of a stick. He had a tray of sticks in front of him, and I realized he was chewing out brushes. Henry had a species of shrub growing around the house that sent out straight green stalks packed full of silky fibers that made nice bristles if you broke them down a little. Depending on what size shoot you picked, you could chew out any brush you wanted, from hairline to one you could use to paint a house. Henry had made up about a dozen, brand-new.

"Good," Henry said, touching the harness. "I was just about to call you." He pressed the new brush against the back of his hand, chewed it a few more times, and then put it into the tray with the others.

"Take this, please?"

I took up the tray, and he grabbed the bar and steered me into the big room. There he had set up his stool and another chair and a flat canvas on an easel in the middle of the room.

"Put the tray down and sit," he said.

I sat. My heart was starting to beat faster. Henry sat to my left and a little behind me. He took up a palette and squeezed out colors from tubes. They were like the paint tubes we used. Henry knew which colors he wanted. He had learned, when he was going blind, to put everything he needed in the same order every time.

"Clouds today?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Today we paint the bench," he said. "How far away?"

I told him.

"Where?"

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"If you square your shoulders to the canvas, where?"

"A little off-center to the right."

He took a pencil then and reached past me and made a sketch. It took

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him about a minute to block out the shape of the bench. The perspective, the angle, even the shadow lines, were perfect. It was amazing.

"How can you do that?"

"Inside. Old as I am, long as I've lived here, I'd better remember. But anything new" — he shook his head — "I need my guide dog."

"You're going to try to paint?"

"No. I *am* going to paint. With you."

"But I can't paint. I can't even draw a straight line!"

"Yes. And you cannot fly, either," he said.

I had to smile as I thought about it. In a way, it was a bigger responsibility than flying him around. Henry was one of the most famous artists ever to live. Anywhere.

"It would make me very happy," he said, and I felt a flood of emotion from him that almost knocked me off the stool.

"All right," I said. "I'll try."

"Good," Henry said.

"But how do we do it?"

"We learn. Like flying. The first lesson is color. Take this brush. I want you to mix a color for me on the palette."

"Which color?"

"Look at the bench. Give me the darkness with the light inside of it. Mix me the color you called *vast*."

We did that first painting in a couple of hours. Henry wasn't one of those artists who worry a piece to death. He liked to work quickly, and, in fact, I had to get him to calm down on that first one because we hadn't worked out a system yet. Henry listened to me. He stopped fussing and began to ask what things in the painting looked like, and showed me where the colors ought to go, and how I should mix them differently for different times of the day. I never thought you could actually teach a thing like painting, but Henry had a way of making you understand one thing by talking about something else. And sometimes he let my hand go free, and said I should do whatever I wanted. I said no, but Henry said the paintings couldn't be considered only his, and if I was really going to help him, I had to be in there, too. So I did the best I could. As we worked, I had to tell him everything: how big the shapes were and where they were on the canvas. Eventually we worked out a way of plotting out a grid in

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proportion to the dimensions of a canvas. That way, Henry could reckon the composition and know where he was, and tell me where to go. We made a scale of colors, too, with the primaries and shades mixed like notes on a piano. Voicing the colors, Henry called it.

It was all about communication and breaking everything down so that you could tell a lot with a minimum of description. It took awhile, but we got to be good at it, as good as we were at flying. I was his guide. Henry said that he felt such pleasure coming from me when we were working together that he didn't care if he saw the pictures or not. He could *feel* what they looked like, and set them up in his mind.

We brought the first painting of the bench back to Henry's club in exchange for the one we had taken away. Everyone there was thrilled about it, and said it was as good a piece of work as any he had done. Henry gave me full credit. This was the first painting of his *vast* period. From now on, we were going to be painting vast works using vast colors. Eventually we did do a whole series of pictures in that same green-sand color. I got to be almost as paint-spattered as Henry was. And I was beginning to understand why he never wanted to wash it off.

So far this has been mostly about Henry. That's natural. When I first came to the Atelier, all I thought about was Henry. But don't think that I ever for a minute forgot who I was or where I came from, or the number of days that were left on my contract. Henry knew how I felt. He waited until word about the paintings had got out. Then he arranged for us to visit the Academy.

It was pleasant to go back. I was the big success of the school. They had photos up of me and Henry together, and old pictures, too, of a skinny, long-haired me wearing a training harness. They held a big assembly, and Henry gave a speech, which I translated, and then I followed up with a speech of my own. I told them how we were all the same underneath, and how anyone who had seen with another person's eyes would know that. I added that when you had to look out for someone else all the time, you automatically took care of yourself. I was real inspirational. They got a good dose of Henry, too. Up in the top row, I saw Mom and Dad hugging each other until they were both red in the face.

Afterward there was a reception in the library, where I stood around and tried to be polite and answer questions. I said that guide dogs were

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going to be a big thing, and that it might help the colony pay its way more. Since we were all the same under the skin, there was no reason to think we couldn't be guides for other races, too. Maybe we had a talent for it, although it didn't take much talent when the clients were as nice as Henry. I got even more maudlin than that, even, until Henry drew me aside a little.

"Tired?"

"I'm all right."

"That last answer was a little much."

"You heard me?"

"I could feel you getting emotional," he said.

"Well," I said, "you might as well share the warmth."

"Why don't you go off and see your friends?"

"But you need me here."

"Oh, they're not going to let me go anywhere. And I have Business Manager to translate for me. You go on awhile." And he shushed me out with those big hands of his.

My friends and I went off to a coffeehouse on the edge of campus. You could see the Tree glowing off in the distance. We all sat around, and it was a little awkward at first. A lot of them were training to be guides, too. I still had my harness on, and I could tell it bothered some of them to see me wearing it, but by and by we had our coffee and started laughing, and it was like I had never left. One of the girls I had known pretty well before wanted me to sit close to her. Every now and then, she tried to kiss me. I didn't mind. Being with a girl was one of the things you missed plenty, if you started to think about it.

Everyone asked me questions. They were pretty much the same ones I had answered before, until this boy named Scott asked me what Henry was really like.

"What do you mean?"

Scott was someone I had never cared for much. He was the kind that could twist anything around to get a look at its bad side. He had been a class behind me, and thought he had to compete. I never thought that, which drove him crazy, I suppose.

Scott said, "I mean, when he lets loose. How is he?"

"He doesn't 'let loose,'" I said, feeling myself tightening up.

"Right. He's only the most famous thing they've ever had. All of them

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buzz about him. Don't they start buzzing when you fly by?"

"I guess they do."

"You *guess* they do! You must get a good dose every time you go out —not to mention what you've had today."

Scott said this with a sneer, and it was interesting: I got mad. He was talking about emotion, and here was one I hadn't felt for a long time.

"Just what are you getting at?"

"I'm talking about you living for the taste. Why, you're no better than a renegade down inside the Tree!"

I should have just ignored him, but I couldn't. The one thing I hadn't done was taste any more emotion than was good for me. In fact, I gave myself tons of credit for tasting a lot less. So I got up and grabbed his collar and lifted him up into the air, practically.

"It *is* strong," I said. "It's plenty strong, and you've got to have it when you're living out there by yourself. But I don't, because if ever I did, I *would* be a junkie. I'd be living down inside the Tree. I wouldn't be able to help Henry, and I wouldn't be able to help myself, either."

"You're so high and mighty," Scott sputtered. "But you don't fool me. Maybe you won't admit it —"

I pushed him back down in his chair. His arm hit the table, some of the coffee spilled, and they all jumped up. The whole place got quiet. I said that I'd better go.

"*Junkie*," Scott yelled after me.

SCOTT WAS a fool, but what a fool says can eat at you, too, and anyway, there was some truth in it. To be a guide dog, you did have to forget about yourself. When you were flying, sometimes it seemed as though it took every cell in your brain to keep going and avoid a crash. It taxed you to the limit, and even then, you felt a disaster was coming any second — that there was all this responsibility, and you never quite measured up. That's why sometimes you would see guide dogs flying with faces clouded over, looking to the side and avoiding your eyes. That's why every so often a guide could lose his grip. You thought you really deserved to have all that love after what you went through.

I was thinking things when we left the school that night. I guess Henry could tell something was up. We were riding in a car with Business

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Manager. Henry respected my feelings and didn't say anything until Business Manager dropped us off at the Atelier.

"Another reception," Henry said. "Just like all the rest."

Been to a lot of them, have you?" I said sharply.

He had got some leaves from the cooler and was working his jaws on them, and now he stopped and turned his head in my direction.

"We have receptions. Just like yours. For exactly the same reasons."

"Good for you," I said.

"What's up?" Henry said. I swear he had even learned to make that hiss of his sound sympathetic. But at the moment I hated him for trying.

"Nothing."

"Did something happen while you were off with your friends?"

"They aren't my friends. I don't have any friends."

He chuckled softly. "Oh, I don't think that's true."

"Don't start, Henry. I'm not your friend. I'm your *dog*. Do you know what a *dog* is, Henry? We can't have them here because we can't afford to keep them, but do you know what they are? They're *pets*. We love 'em because they're smart enough to remember us and dumb enough to love us no matter what we do. So we love them back. But we don't respect them, Henry. Because we think we're better than they are. The dumbest, most low-down one of us is still better than the best dog, Henry. And that's what you call me. *Dog*."

He let me go on awhile. He had never seen me angry before, and I think he wanted to watch. At last he said, "*Dog* is just a word. We don't have *dogs*. *Dogs* is your word. It's what is in your head when you hear us speak of you. I would never call you a *dog*, the way you mean."

"What would you call me?"

"Eyes," he said. "Hands. *Friend*."

He was right. I was all those things to him. I felt ashamed for lighting into him, and said I was sorry, and I vowed privately never to let my feelings get the better of me again. I told myself they had got built up out of a lot of other unhappy things. Now that I had got them off my chest, everything would be all right again. And for a while it was. We did a few more still lifes of flowers and trees on the grounds of the Atelier. Sometimes Henry would feel around to "see" their texture and general positions, but now he more often let me block the pictures out alone, and

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put in only a brush stroke or two. I didn't care if he did. After that reception, I had begun to take a kind of permanent, different view of everything.

After a few days of this, Henry declared we were getting stale, and said we should go out. And so we flew around. It was getting to be winter, and it rained or sometimes it was cold and blew pretty good. Henry didn't care. We just bundled up, and out we went.

By this time I had got used to the flying and began to take more notice of where we were going and who and what was around us. I was proud of myself for being able to do it; I thought that I had grown and detached myself from the job of being a guide dog. What I had really detached myself from, of course, was Henry. He knew it, too. But he never complained. He just let me have my own way, and waited to see how things would go.

One day we flew deep into the Tree. It was dark and raining, with flashes of lightning that seemed to come from all directions at once, green and cold and throwing long, slow-fading shadows. We were headed for a shop that wanted Henry to sign some art books. It was one of our shops, and I think Henry agreed to do it to make me feel a little better.

We didn't say much on the way in. I pretended to concentrate because there really was a lot of traffic. I still felt bad about Henry. I thought the way I was feeling about him was serious and forever. It was just one of the cycles a friendship goes through. You have the euphoria and enthusiasm piled up in the beginning, and then the reaction sets in. You feel horrified by the feelings, and you try to deny them and deny the other person. It goes away, though, if you let it. It would have with Henry if I had just given it a chance.

Down inside the Tree, it was really dark. We were in the oldest part of the city, and where the flyways became bores worn smooth by the centuries of brushing wingtips. They had a few lights, which were like sparklers, set up at the head of the runs, and they had little buzz boxes, also at the head of the runs, that bounced noise off the surfaces and helped the radar along. We bounced around for a while, and then came to an intersection. There was an avenue that led to the open part of the Tree, and three bores, all pitch-black, headed straight down. I described where we were to Henry, and he said we should take the middle bore, which dumped into the quarter where the bookshop was.

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"Oh Henry, I don't know," I said.

"Why? What's up? It's fine. You're doing fine."

It was fine for *him*. Henry was enjoying himself. Why shouldn't he? This was like a trip down memory lane for him. His ancestors had spent a couple of aeons chewing out the insides of logs.

"It's too dark. I don't have a lamp. You should have told me about this."

"We'll go slow. I know these streets like home."

He sounded a little impatient, and I felt it, and felt myself wanting to please him. Right then and there, I hated him. Most of all I hated myself. I *was* an addict. I might as well admit it. No matter how little I took, I still lived for his approval.

"All right, Henry. You're the boss. Let's do it." He took up the grab bar and pressed his knees in and lifted his wings, and we were off.

Down and down we dropped. I couldn't see anything. I heard Henry grunt in surprise a time or two when we bumped the wall, and I was glad about it. I made myself into a load for him, the way a bad rider is a load on the back of a horse. It seemed to take forever to get to the end of the run, but finally we dumped into a big square — or what would be a square in one of our towns. It was a public place where people without jobs could sit while everybody else went to work. In this case the people sitting there were renegades. About six of them, with their backs to the wall, bored and dead-looking until we lighted on the square. Then it was like someone had thrown the switch. Up they popped, grinning and elbowing each other, ready for no good. I swore under my breath. I had never seen so many lousy-looking guys in one place before.

"What's up?" Henry said.

"Renegades," I said. "Earth dogs."

"Really!" he said. "What do they look like?"

"They look like scum, Henry, all right?" They were coming over now. "I think it would be a great idea if we just went back the way we came."

"Don't believe I can do it just now, unfortunately. Need some rest."

"Could you handle a straight run?"

"I believe so."

"There's a hole straight across the square. Let's go for it."

He lifted his wings, and we buzzed off — but we were slow, and I was dragging. Still, we might have gone through them, because they had been sitting a long time, and Henry with his wings out was no small thing. But

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one of them caught my eye.

"That's it," he called after me. "Good doggy!"

And I lowered my legs and stopped us.

"What did you say?"

"I said *doggy*, which is what you are. In fact, you're worse than a dog. A dog doesn't know any better."

I should have ignored him. Who was he to tell me anything? He was a low-down junkie who had probably been a guide dog once himself. But the way he looked at me and the way he said it and the way I was feeling meant I couldn't let it pass.

"Let go of the harness, Henry," I said.

"I think not."

"If you don't let go, then it's true and I am your dog," I said. "Let go!"

I yanked away. I never thought that he might have been afraid. He was the old one. He was the one standing there blind and alone. All I cared about was how I felt. I waded into that crowd of louts, and went up to the one who had called me out, and I swung at him. They were on me in a second. They were weak and slow, and I was fast and strong — but there were too many of them, and I didn't stay up long. Henry figured out what was happening to me before I did. They have a way of sounding an alarm with their wings, and they can tell who is in trouble by the sound — and they all knew it was Henry, and hundreds of them came, more than could fit in the bores feeding into the square. It was a swarm of them. It was just what the junkies wanted. They left off before they had kicked me to death, and lay back with their arms spread and their eyes shut, soaking all that emotion in with the biggest and most beatific smiles upon their faces.

The next morning I was called in to see the Director at the school. I was sore. My ribs were cracked, and one of my eyes was swollen shut. The Director paid no attention. He wanted to take the opportunity to let me know exactly how I had let everyone down. I didn't say much at first. I thought I would let him get it off his chest. If I had known what he had in mind, though, I might have tried to say something in my own defense.

"A guide does nothing that would endanger the safety of a client!" the Director began. "That's what we taught you. That is the essence of everything we do here! And you, you especially! Didn't we impress upon you day after day the enormous responsibility you took on? He is the most

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important personality of this world! And our reputation stood to rise or fall depending on how you succeeded with that trust!"

I had to say something then.

"Maybe that's the problem," I said. "Why do we advertise ourselves as servants? They'll never respect us that way."

"Because that is what we are. We have to succeed as what we are. Then we can advance."

"You mean they'll give us a *promotion*?" I laughed right in his face. "Like, if we get good grades, we get to move up a class?"

He was getting red now. He had thought it all out.

"They'll never promote us," I went on. "Why should they? I'm as close to one of them, this 'leading personality,' as you say, as any of us here have ever got, and what good has it done? Henry hasn't said, 'Don't be my guide.' He's never said I was his equal. He knows what he is. He doesn't have any idea what we are. That's because *we* don't have any idea! So how could he? All this talk about responsibility. Well, who's responsible for the fact that all we thought about was getting here? We had no idea what to do after that. Absolutely none at all! So now we live as outsiders and cook up schemes to make ourselves useful. Great. And you sit there and hope we'll be promoted to *necessary*!"

"I was hoping for some sign of contrition on your part," the Director said. "But I can see that's too much to expect from you."

"You got that right. Can I go?"

He had a file open in front of him.

"Go? Where do you think you're going?"

"Home," I said. "Henry needs me."

The Director smiled a little. He had been saving this.

"Whatever gave you the idea you would be going back there?"

I sat up. "What do you mean?"

"You left a client alone while you engaged in a fight. And caused a riot," he said. "The whole basis of the relationship between a client and his guide is trust. And you have shattered that trust. Your relationship with this client is therefore over."

"I'm fired?"

"Oh, you are still under contract. And you have shown that you can be an excellent guide under certain circumstances. Therefore, we are giving you a second chance. We have a new assignment with another handi-

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capped person, a regular citizen this time. One whose life is not subject to the same level of scrutiny —"

"They are *all* under scrutiny!"

"Nevertheless —"

"Have you asked Henry? Is this what he wants?"

"A new guide has already been assigned to 'Henry,' as you call him."

"Who?"

"That information is confidential."

"Who!" I jumped up, and he jumped back, pale and sweating. It is easy to decide things alone in an office. I swept up the file and had a look.

"Scott? You're sending *Scott?*"

"He is the most qualified —"

"He's a dick. He'll never work out. Henry won't want him around."

"I can call Security," the Director said. "I can void your contract, and your family will be in a work farm by tomorrow afternoon. Is that the way you want it?"

I stood there with the file in my hand. My temper had been getting a big workout lately. Maybe that had taken some of the edge off. I stood there a moment, and then I closed the file and handed it back to him.

"You're making a big mistake," I said.

"I think not."

"Henry and I understand each other. We're a team. I'm helping him paint again. It would break his heart —"

"The client understands the situation," the Director said.

"You mean he *knows?*"

"I met with him myself," the Director said smugly.

That finished it for me. If Henry didn't care, why should I? I felt the rest of the fight draining out of me. But I did have one faint hope left.

"I'll have to get my things."

"We've already had them delivered back here," the Director said.

THEY GAVE me a room at the school, and I lived there with my stuff in boxes in the corner. I didn't go to class, and nobody checked up on me. I blamed myself and said that I would take it all back if I could. That had the effect on reality it always does. At the end of the week, they moved me into an apartment in a suburb of the Tree with my new client. I called this one Lester.

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Lester was a chemist who had been blinded in an accident at work. He had just come out of rehab training, and his insurance had provided him with the cost of a guide. Unfortunately, Lester was not interested in having a guide. He was in a post-injury phase of great depression, and insisted on living away from his nest. All he wanted to do was stay in all day and be blind. As I was feeling more or less the same way, we made a great pair. But Lester needed somebody to make him get off his abdomen. In the mood I was in, I was not up to being a cheerleader. So, with Lester not wanting any help, and me not interested in giving him any, you could see where things were headed.

Which is not to say I never tried to get him out. We actually did some harness work, and one day even went around the neighborhood. In the end, though, it only seemed to make him sadder. And that meant I was going to have plenty of time on my hands.

Lester's place was small, and it was depressing, too. No air, no windows. I couldn't sit alone inside, and as he didn't care what I did, I started to go out alone into the Tree. I wasn't being a renegade. I wore my harness and carried my ID, and if any one of them or any human stopped me, I explained I was out on an errand. I went all over just looking around. Up at the top, you had to do a lot of climbing because of the distance between perches, and I started to get into pretty good shape. And I got my harness light hooked up, too, and went into the bores as deep as I could go. I was really hoping to run into the louts who had ruined me with Henry. I went back to the square a couple of times, and once I even stayed all day, hanging back in the shadows and waiting. But they never were there. Maybe that was just as well. I have to admit that I didn't have a real good idea of what I would do if I did catch them.

Then one day I saw Henry. There was no mistaking that big head and those cloudy, milk-white eyes. I was up in the crown of the Tree, watching the clouds pile up like they did every afternoon that time of year. And he came along with his wings out, turning his head slowly from side to side as if his radar were still working. But he didn't have any radar, of course. What he had was his new guide dog in a harness. I leaned forward, and sure enough, it was Scott, flailing around and looking like he was going to crash them any second. The buzzing got louder. They always started in when Henry passed by. He was like a seltzer tablet dropped into the water wherever he went. And then, finally, they came close enough to where I

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could see the bastard's face.

Henry was guiding *him*. He could sense what was giving Scott problems, and sort of point him in the direction that made him the least nervous, and that is where they went. They flew in big spirals, practicing together, so I got to watch them for a while. It was almost worth what had happened to watch Scott sweat like that. But in the end my satisfaction was bitter. I felt lonely and cheated, and for the first time wished for what I had lost. I watched them until they flew out of sight. Then I made up my mind that I would go and see Henry that night.

The tricky part wasn't getting away from Lester. I just told him that I wanted to go out. He didn't care. I'm not sure he even heard me. Even if he *had* heard me and he did care, I knew he wouldn't bother reporting me. He was glad I was gone.

So I went off. There were routes out of the Tree where transports flew, and I waited above one that pointed in the Atelier's direction. Finally came a lorry with a soft-topped trailer that I took a leap for and made. I banged my arm pretty good hitting a rib under the tarp when I landed, and almost bounced off. But I was strong and determined. The thought that I might kill myself somehow did not occur to me at all.

That was good, because the transport really took off once it was out of the city, and I had to hang on tight to keep from being blown off. Then, just as I started to worry about how I would get off, the transport got caught in a snarl of traffic. So I was all right. I just slid down and started walking. I could see the Atelier perched on the cliff up ahead of me, glowing in the twilight.

It was a nice, fresh evening, with the damp cool you get after the rains have come. There were peepers in the bushes on the sides of the path, and the sound of the traffic moving slowly above my head. The ground was all mine. I was glad for the weeks of training I had put in when it came to climbing up to Henry's. Several times I got stuck under overhangs that I didn't have the knack of getting around, and had to backtrack and try again. Finally, though, I reached the terrace wall and looked into the big room.

Everything was as it had been. I felt touched, but then I laughed at myself. Who was going to rearrange the furniture? I decided to wait. What I wanted to do was alert Henry, but leave Scott out of it. I waited and

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watched, and after a while I saw that nobody was home. So I went in and headed for the kitchen to see what supplies they had for a guide dog. I did find some orange sherbert sitting in a pan of dry ice. That made me madder than anything, because of Henry being so nice and Scott such a woos. I had paid for that ice cream by trying to eat what Henry ate.

Since I was getting worked up about Scott anyway, I decided to poke around my old room. Scott had cleaned it out. All the wood was stacked up according to size on the shelf underneath the bench, and the tools were hanging in the rack. The place had been swept, and it looked as though he had even washed down the walls. It was disgusting. People have no business being that neat. If they do, it is only because they want to show up the rest of us.

Scott had set up a desk, too. It was all polished on the top, with a short row of reference books squeezed between a pair of lead slabs that were spray-painted gold. The desk drawers were locked. It was such an insult to Henry. As if he cared about what Scott had in his desk! I cared, though. I found a long, straight chisel on the tool rack, and when I popped out the drawer in the middle, the rest of them came free, too. The inside of the drawers were just as neat as the rest of the room. I found a steel box with money inside, files of school records, a receipt book, a ledger, a journal, a calendar and a log, plus pens and paper and supplies. There was also a chewed-up baseball that looked about a thousand years old. Well. Everybody always keeps at least one thing that isn't like the rest of him.

I laid it all out and looked everything over and decided the journal would probably be most interesting to start with. I sat down on the bed and began to read. It was slow going though. Scott wrote down what he ate every day and how much money he spent, and how hard he studied what, and how many hours he slept and what the dreams were. There was no reason to hide that journal, because it would put you right to sleep. I started skimming and got all the way to the end, and then I found something that made me yell out loud. "He and H. are going to bookstore tomorrow," I read. "I have arranged a surprise on the way. We'll see how he does when he meets the boys."

The entries were all dated, and on a hunch I opened up the account ledgers and had a look. And sure enough, there were six payments of one hundred gold dollars, with receipts clipped to the page, for "personal services." And the signatures on all of them looked pretty rocky. Just what

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you would expect from renegades.

Well, that was it for me. They say that if you find out something by snooping around, you have no business getting mad at the person you are snooping on, but this was my business. Scott had hired those thugs to wait for Henry and me! He knew what would rile me most, and he had done it, and it had worked, and now he had got what he wanted. Oh, I wanted to kill him!

But he wasn't around, and I paced for a while and gradually grew cooler and began to consider what I ought to do. It was better to be cool about such things. I left the desk ransacked and threw some of his books around and pulled down the tool rack. That last was for spite. Then I went out and found a good perch under a thicket on a ledge up above the Atelier, and I settled down and waited.

It was dark by the time they came back in Business Manager's car. Scott got out first. His hair was messed, and his harness was twisted around on his back. He went right inside and up to his room while Business Manager led Henry in. Then the lights came on, and I got to see him stare at the desk and whirl around and tear down to get Business Manager. Business Manager did not appear impressed by the damage. To him, it probably looked the same as when I had lived there. But Scott made him bring Henry, and then they were all three looking around, Scott putting Henry in touch with the harness and jabbering away at him. Henry felt around a little, and I could see him speak to Business Manager. Scott meanwhile was cleaning up. He just could never stand to have anything out of place at all.

After a while they left him alone, and Scott went to bed. Henry and Business Manager were in the big room having some mead. Then Business Manager stretched out his wings and said good night. Henry didn't sleep much, but the rest of them usually had to have around eight hours just like we do. Business Manager drove off, and I waited some more. It was deep-dark now, with the stars spread across the black sky like blistered paint. I waited some more. Then I went inside and found Henry working on a canvas.

It almost broke your heart to see him do it. He was feeling with his left and putting it on with his right, and then getting the shape from where the wet paint was; but he was missing, and the colors were all wrong because he had no one to help him lay out his palette. He must have known; he

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was drooping a little, but he kept on. I think he did because he liked the feel of the brush dragging across the canvas with the load of paint on it. I watched him for a long time before I saw what he was getting at, and realized it was a portrait. It was a face. My face.

I came up beind him and touched his shoulder. He gave a start. Then I made him take up the grab bar, and said, "What's up, Henry?"

Oh, I got it then. I had never felt it so strong or so pure. It was just like hot liquid gold poured right in through the top of my head. My heart was hammering, and my knees felt like water. Fortunately, Henry knew what was happening to me, and backed off. When I came to, he was stroking my head and saying my name over and over, not through the harness, but in his hissing English.

"Ohhh. You got to watch that, Henry." I knew I would probably be worthless for a week after a dose like that. He helped me up. I was just glad to see him. I didn't care anymore about the rest of it.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had to make sure you were getting along all right."

There was a moment of silence. Then I said, "So how's the new dog working out?"

"He's not you."

"Well. Not many people are."

That made him laugh.

"I saw you trying to paint," I said. "Just now, I mean. I've been waiting here for you for a while."

He cocked his head. "Don't you have a new client?"

"He doesn't like to go out. Truth is, I don't think he's so happy to have me around."

"So you ran away."

"No. I asked if I could go."

You didn't tell him you were coming here, though."

"He wouldn't care."

I felt him looking at me.

"No, I didn't."

"You'll be in more trouble," Henry said. He sounded tired and worried. Worse than that: he sounded old. I knew it was my fault. I knew he missed me, and I knew I had let him down. If I had followed my training, I would still be with him, and Scott would be with Lester or somebody else.

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"You were in Scott's room, weren't you?" Henry said severely.

"Yes. I was mad. I wanted to get even."

"'Get even' for what? He had nothing to do with what happened."

I bit my tongue. I wanted to tell him what Scott had done, but I couldn't. I had to accept responsibility for what *I* had done. I had played into Scott's hands. His plan would have come to nothing if only I had kept my temper. If I told Henry what I knew, I would only disappoint him more.

"Scott was very upset."

"I know."

"You should make it right," Henry said. "You should go up and offer to clean up the room."

The truth I was holding in was practically making my head pop, but I couldn't say a thing. Because everything *he* was telling me was the more important truth.

"O.K. But he's sleeping, Henry, and —"

"Yes?"

"Henry, I'd just like to fly with you one more time. Would that be all right?"

He chuckled a little. They had a way of doing that that sounded just like your mother.

"Please, Henry! We never had a chance to end it ourselves. They just came in and took me away. Did they even ask how you felt or what you thought they ought to do? I know there's nothing we can do about that, but at least we could fly one last time. Maybe it would be easier for you then. Maybe it would be easier for me to accept things. Then I wouldn't always be thinking about what happened. Please, Henry."

"All right," he said. "One more time, for you and for me."

I took him out to the terrace. There were so many stars you could have read a book. Henry hooked up with the grab bar and tucked in his knees and lifted his wings, and we took off. I had never felt him so strong before. The sound of his wing beats was a pitch higher, and he made his turns with authority and climbed with such ease that I thought we would fly up until we ran out of air. We climbed and climbed, up above the Tree, until the city was nothing but a fuzzy ball of light. Henry didn't say much. He just kept climbing, and then all of a sudden pointed us down in a steep dive. I leaned into it with him, not thinking about the danger in it. We flew straight down together right through the outskirts of the Tree, right

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through the traffic and into the core. I shifted on pure instinct and guesswork, and I was right every time. We plunged deeper and deeper into the bored-out avenues and out again, spiraling down around the shaft, until at last he pulled up and used all the energy we had gathered in our long plunge to swoop upward again in a curving, effortless arc out toward the Atelier. It was thrilling. It was as if he had summed up all of his life into that one flight. He sent out about it, too. In the cool evening, gliding amost without a sound with the Atelier in view, you could hear them buzz. All of them knew what Henry was doing. Maybe they knew what he would do. I didn't know anything. I was just grateful for the chance to fly again.

We came closer, and I turned the harness light on, and there on the terrace, I saw Scott and Business Manager. Scott was pointing at us, and I thought, He's probably called the Director, and that broke the feeling I had and made me forget all my good intentions. I was going for him as soon as we hit ground, and to hell with anything else. So as we came in, Henry spreading out his wings to pull us up, I got my legs ready, and then Henry twisted a little, suddenly enough to snap the safety release on the harness, and dropped me. I landed on the terrace as he rose off, climbing away, flying blind.

It is funny about momentum. Henry's carried him up and away. Mine sent me right into Scott, and we sprawled together past Business Manager. I popped to my feet, and I had enough left to pull him up, too, all ready to yank his head off. Then I realized that Henry was free of the harness. I looked up. You could see him spiraling up and out against the stars that sparkled like diamond sand on a black marble floor. He made a wide right turn, and you could see him beating his wings to pick up speed. Then it was like the mountain just got up and put itself in front of him. Henry flew right into it.

A couple of rocks and small stones rattled down the steep slope and came to rest. After that came the silence.

THEY HAD a system of laws and justice, and a forum like a court, and they put me on trial. I was the first human being to come under their jurisdiction. Ordinarily, we were not worth the trouble, but because Henry was so important, they declared me a citizen and brought me up on charges.

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I went in thinking that I would defend myself. But after a couple of days, I saw that they were interested only in reconstructing the circumstances of the crime. You couldn't blame them, I guess. Since it is impossible for them to lie to each other, proving guilt was unnecessary. All they had to do was make the explanation official. There were no set punishments, either. After they reconstructed everything, they would tailor a sentence to fit whatever offense they came up with. Nobody questioned it. The laws weren't even written down. They were bred into you.

According to custom, the accused could select the venue, and so I picked the auditorium at school. I had a lawyer, and they had a prosecutor, and the witnesses came in and gave statements and answered questions. They called the Director, who said that I had been relieved because I had abandoned my post to fight with bums, and so had endangered my master's life. He actually said *master*. My lawyer tried to turn that around by saying I was only attempting to save Henry from renegades, but they brought the scuzzballs in, and they all swore they weren't interested in Henry at all, but had merely made a joke at my expense. I waited for my lawyer to do something with that; he didn't, though, and so I jumped in.

"Say, weren't you guys tipped off that we were going to that bookstore?"

"Who woulda done that?"

"Him," I said, pointing dramatically at Scott, who had come to the trial every day.

"What about him?"

"Didn't he pay you to jump us?"

"Naw," the lout said. "Why would he do that?"

"Because you're scum," I said. "And scum are always available for the right price."

He smiled at me. "Maybe so," he said. "How much they pay you to wear that collar?"

I guess I didn't help myself then when I went after him. It took a couple of them to hold me while I shouted it was all a lie: that I had found out about the payoffs from a ledger in Scott's room, and that they should call him and ask about it; that Henry and I had loved each other, and that I had tried to get him out of the square, and that he had *dropped* me on purpose in the end because he wanted to fly alone; and nobody lived forever, not even Henry, and that if they really wanted to honor him, they should not

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insult his memory by making out that he would ever have let anyone get away with killing him. I was eloquent, all right, in between the biting and kicking. Finally they got me tied down to a chair and took a few more witnesses. Lester came in and said I had run away. Scott stepped up — eyeing the ropes on the chair all the time to make sure I couldn't get loose — and testified I had ransacked his room and had even destroyed a painting that he and Henry had done together. He just went up there and lied. I suppose it didn't matter. They knew we could lie. And because we had the talent for it and they did not, they assumed that all of us *were* liars.

After a couple of days, they closed out the testimony and put it to the vote. Everyone who had followed the trial or read the transcript could get in on the decision. They put their heads together, millions of them, and came up with a unanimous verdict. I was guilty of murder through negligence. My sentence was to be put out on the Rock and to remain there until I expired.

They gave me one evening at the school before the sentence would be carried out. I stayed in my old room with a guard posted outside and entertained a few visitors. Nobody really had much to say. I ended up patting backs and doing most of the talking. I didn't mind making them feel better. Somebody had to do it.

But it was hard when Dad finally showed up late in the evening. Mom couldn't take seeing me in person, I guess; Dad took a snapshot to bring back to her. We chatted a little about the new house they were building and how well my brother was doing in the merchant marine. Then there was that awkward waiting you get when one person wants something and the other one knows it but doesn't know what. What I wanted was for him to thank me at least for being a good son and trying to work my contract off. He didn't say any of that, though. What he finally came up with was that I should not be afraid when the end came.

"You mean when I die?"

"When you realize it's all over."

"That ought to be right about when I die," I said.

"Don't think about it now. Just remember to be brave. When the time comes."

How brave is he gonna be? I thought.

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"Son," he said.

"Yeah, Dad."

"Remember the day I brought you here? I gave you something. A little knife. Do you remember?"

"Yeah, Dad, I remember."

"Do you still have it?"

I looked at him.

"They want me to get it from you."

"Christ, Dad!"

"Even if they didn't, I'd still like to have it. It would mean a lot to me."

"Would it, Dad?"

"Yes."

So I gave it to him. Weak as he was, I could never really get angry at him.

They gave me a nice dinner. Stuff from home like lobster and a bowl of radishes. I ate as much as I could. I wanted to last a long time out there on the Rock. They probably had a record for how long somebody had made it out there. Whatever it was, I wanted to try and break it. There was beer, too, and some brandy with the dessert, and I felt pretty sleepy by the time I finished. I lay on the bed with my arm over my eyes. After a while I heard the door open. I looked up. It was one of them, looking too big against the frame of the door. I sat up and saw that someone had cleared the dinner plates away.

"Oh, get out of here, will you?" I said. Then I saw that it was Business Manager. He was holding my harness. He didn't move. He just looked at me, trying to see how I was. When I reached for the harness, he handed it to me, and I put it on. It felt a little stiff, but warmed right up when I powered it on, the needles pressing lightly against the top of my back.

"How are you?" he said.

"Oh, I'm just great. Never better."

I guess he knew about sarcasm, because he didn't say anything. Finally I asked him what he was doing here.

"I came to bring you the harness. You should wear it tomorrow."

"Now, why should I do that?"

"You are a guide," he said. He was looking at me, and suddenly I felt bad. He was someone who had always tried to help Henry, and I knew Henry

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was fond of him.

"I'm sorry about what happened, you know," I said.

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

"You're the only one who feels that way."

"Not the only one," Business Manager said.

"Nobody spoke up."

"That is not our way."

"No. I guess it isn't."

He turned, ready to go. "Wait a minute. Can I ask you something?"

He looked back. His eyes were shiny, like black glass.

"What do you think happens? After you die?"

Why ask me that? What do you think happens?"

"I don't know. You change. But I think you're still around somewhere in a different form."

"Do you think it would be any different for us?"

"No. I guess it wouldn't."

"We believe that you can remain. And see and act through another. If you want to and if you are strong enough."

"Henry was strong, wasn't he?"

"Wear the harness tomorrow," he said.

What they did was put me on the Rock. It is a smooth basalt dome that is in the middle of a larger caldera. It is very high and steep and polished like marble by the wind. There are no handholds. The valley floor is littered with the shells of the ones who have come before me. If you're one of them, they clip your wings and leave you here, shunned by the rest. Then the loneliness and the humiliation get to you. Eventually you give up, and the wind pushes you off. The floor of the caldera is littered with the bodies of dead criminals.

I sit on the Rock and think about jumping.

The sky is that brown-green color Henry called vast. Off toward the Tree, I see something tiny flash against the clouds. It gets bigger. It is one of them, flying toward me. I wish it were Henry, come to take me home to the Atelier, but of course it is not.

It is Business Manager. And I am wearing my harness.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Nicoji, M. Shayne Bell, Baen Books, $3.95

Author's Choice Monthly #14, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440. $4.95 paper, $25 hardcover, $50 signed in leather

Castleview, Gene Wolfe, Tor, $4.95

M. SHAYNE BELL is another of that remarkable group of young science fiction talents centering around the writing program fostered by Marion ("Doc") Smith, of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Dr. Smith — male — has seen a parcel of these undergraduate and graduate writers come and go, largely working under the Xenobia writing club at the University, and publishing, at first, in *The Leading Edge*, an increasingly prosperous semiprofessional publication put out by the club. Then, some of them really spread their wings — Dave Wolverton, Virginia Baker, and Shayne, for three — and go on.

I am not sure to what extent the example of Orson Scott Card has influenced these bright and likeable Mormons. I am sure winning First Place in various Quarters of the quarterly L. Ron Hubbard Writers of The Future Contest has not influenced them beyond giving them a stage on which to first appear before the general public, since that is the purpose of the contest. In all honesty, I am sure these people would eventually have made it whether the help was there or not — provided the *idea* of writing science fiction came to them of its own accord.

I frankly don't know that much about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, their agenda. But just as I cannot find a consistent thread in Scott Card stories that would lead me to say "There — he's proselytizing, because no real SF writer would ever say that," so I cannot find the thread in any of the three other writers whom I know to be Mormons. Their religion appears to be irrelevant to their work, in other words . . . it's just plain or

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fancy SF, and you take it or leave it on the same basis that you take or leave any other SF.

Certainly, anyone who has read much Wolverton cannot doubt that this is a major talent, which would have appeared Marion Smith, Scott Card, and L. Ron Hubbard notwithstanding, or withstanding. Similarly, Virginia Baker's course, though shorter on evidence, points to a person who would have awakened to her gifts without a doubt, no matter what the circumstances. And what now of Shayne Bell?

Well, *Nicoji* is a first novel, and like most first novels it has its ups and downs. But it is clearly on an upper at the end, and it has much to recommend it.

Sam and Jake are indentured to the American Nicoji Company, an outfit shipping a luxury foodstuff to Earth from a planet which may or may not have an intelligent race living on it. There are native creatures which no Earthman has bothered to learn the name of, which are called Help and which, in a very limited sense, are help to the supposedly independent Terrestrial farmers. They are loosely described — apparently about one meter tall, furry, apparently all male, and apparently capable of picking up one or two words of English. But they are shy, difficult to work with, and generally unreliable.

Well, all life is like that, on this planet. American Nicoji sang a sweet song to lure Sam and Jake and hundreds of other farm youths from Earth, but once it got them there, it quickly became obvious that between the Company store, the capricious arrival of ships, the general absence of doctors and dentists, etc., etc., what we actually have here is a hierarchy of which not one member, even the top dogs on the planet's surface, is anything more than a slave to American Nicoji. To the point where, although there are rumors of a farmer or two actually getting rich and making his way back to Earth, nobody can actually point to a single case beyond a shadow of a doubt.

In some ways that's the least of it. The ecology of this planet is tough. The farms are in a swamp, and in that swamp are also an array of creeping, crawling things — some a good deal larger than a man — which are only too happy to include man in their already very broad range of prey.

The nicoji, in fact, are the only thing which seems to have no overt designs on man. They are little mud-dwellers which, fished up by the farmers and frozen, and shipped to Earth, support the whole enterprise. Bell says they're delicious — much more so fresh than frozen, but even thawed on Earth they're

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apparently quite something — and about the only thing that Sam and Jake have for a reward is that they can eat all the nicoji they want. I have the feeling the thrill is long gone; Sam and Jake have been on this world long enough so that a jar of peanut butter, for instance, shipped from Earth at considerable expense, is a lot more desirable.

Well, be that as it may, Sam and Jake learn that there is a rival company, down the string of bayous a few hundred kilometers, which offers a better deal. Simultaneously, American Nicoji implants "locator plates" under their wrists, for their own good, and Sam and Jake also get into serious trouble with American Nicoji. So, in the dead of night, with a raft, some supplies, a couple of guns and some Help which comes along for the ride, Sam and Jake head out in search of the other company.

Gradually, it all comes apart. They crudely rip out the locator plates, and so make it "over the border," so to speak, but the Help is very unreliable, the guns are effectively useless, Sam gets bitten by a monster which infects him so that he gets worse and worse, and they get trapped, eventually, by the Foam, which is a floating mass of gel that eats everything. And while Jake gets away from the Foam, sorely, and in the end only temporarily, what it actually is is a harbinger. The entirely ecology of the planet is going to change drastically, going from a majority of carbon-based life forms to a majority based on sulfur, in a long cycle which the Terrestrial occupation of the planet has been too short to detect.

While all this has been going on, much has been passing through Jake's mind. He begins as a boy, really — mooning after his girl, Loryn, whom he left on Earth, mostly — but as he endures the really horrific aspects of his journey in search of the other company, he gradually changes. And how he changes is that he grows up, and among other things realizes that he will never leave this planet, and how to work with the Help, and how to help the Help, and how to turn the nature of things on this planet to account, in its own way, not by attempting to make it Earth-like.

Most of this uplift comes in an epilogue, and in fact after Jake is dead, years later; what Bell was interested in depicting was the process whereby Jake goes from a simple soul to a person capable of analyzing what is going on around him. This is not an entirely satisfactory ending; we ought to have seen some of this, before Jake wandered offstage. But 'tis well

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enough done; 'twill serve.

The main thing about this book is that Jake is a living, breathing human in a complex environment that conceals no hidden jewelled cities or treasure, but that, if you take the trouble, does contain rewards far beyond simple nicoji. It's a well thought out, enjoyable science fiction novel and, once again, clearly by someone who's a born storyteller.

Maybe there's something to be said for not smoking or drinking, not even coffee or tea. Hmm.

Nina Kiriki Hoffman is a name you should know. She keeps promising to write a novel — in fact, she has written a half dozen or more — what I should have said was she keeps promising to send them out. Meanwhile, she has quietly built a spectacular career as a short story writer, mostly in small markets, for about eight years, now. Pulphouse, Inc., where she has sold quite a bit — and where she is employed, part of the time — has now taken the logical step and brought out a collection of her stories.

(It has brought them out as part of their Author's Choice series, of which you should get a catalogue, seeing as this is #14, which means you have missed thirteen other authors, which you should have not done.)

There are nine stories in this collection, ranging from the horripilating "Universal Donor" and "Works of Art" to the risible — not to say *risque* — "Savage Breasts." As usual, editor Kristine Kathryn Rusch has shown impeccable taste.

What is most unusual about Nina Hoffman — and she has a fair number of unusual and striking talents, of which writing is the most prominent — is that she writes, by preference, of sad and lonely children, not all of whom are young, and not all of whom are uncomplicatedly lonely. She is far from the only writer to have this as a dominant theme in her stories, but she is remarkable in the richness, depth, and insight with which she treats of this condition. And in returning to this theme again and again, she never returns to it the same way, or from the same angle; it is as if the world had a very large number of lonely people, each with a particular story to be told about them, if only it could be gotten at, in some patient way that not very many writers could hope to accomplish.

What a fortunate thing that this is not actually the case!

I was thinking that it was a long time since I reviewed a book by Gene Wolfe. I like to dip into Wolfe from time to time; the presumption

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is that he has not yet stopped exploring the vast country which is inside him. Which means there are always new things to be learned from him, and about him. So I picked up the recent reprint of *Castleview*, on the theory that *The Urth of The New Sun* and *Soldier of Arete* represented series, and I didn't want to speak about Wolfe as a series writer this time, and, besides, the idea of a northern Illinois town that was haunted by — among other things — a view of a castle, seemed an idea worth attention.

Which it is. Not only has the town been haunted for generations by a view of a sometimes distant, sometimes not, castle — or perhaps ship — but by a little blonde girl who hitches rides by the side of the road, a giant horseman, and Lord knows what all else.

I will tell you now, straight off, that it's too much. I have no doubt that Wolfe knew exactly what he was doing, but I defy anyone to follow it exactly. It's not that there are too many characters, although there's a parcel of them; it's that there's not enough book. Especially toward the end, there's a sense Wolfe rushed things in order to make them fit somebody's idea of how long the manuscript could be; toward the beginning, conversely, there's sometimes a sense of too leisurely a pace. And the result is that no character really settles in as the hero or heroine of the piece. It's just a bunch of people having various forms of trouble; they're very interesting, most of them, but you don't stay focussed on any of them long enough to care very much about what happens to them.

With that said, remember that we are talking about Mozart; even his minor pieces are instructive. For instance:

Given a northern Illinois town with a view of a castle — at one point, there's a serious attempt to have it be a ship, and this is reinforced by a scene, from its viewpoint, in which the landscape intervening between it and the town of Castleview is in fact a seascape — a view of a castle which has persisted for generations — at what point did this begin? Before, for instance, there was a single white man to behold it? That hardly seems likely.

All right, then, the castle first manifested itself when sufficient white men and women settled in the vicinity. The castle — the ship image turns out to be applicable, but the castle, when visited, always turns out to be a castle, with stones and mullions and other standard castle appurtenances — is Arthurian, although it also involves a werewolf or two, and at least one creature with knobby limbs and four eyes. All right — in other

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words, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the Native American culture. So it's an intruder on the scene, it came only when there was a sufficient white population,* and the questions are:

Why here and nowhere else? Did the people of the town have to do something before the castle would manifest itself for the first time? and if so, why was the town named Castleview, granted that it may at first have been named something else?

And what we learn from this — and several similar exercises with this book — is that Wolfe was above all trying to show that magic is arbitrary. There is, indeed, a King Arthur story buried in here, but I would not let that comfort me too much, if I were you.

The outstanding quality of this book is that nothing really makes sense. Even the out-of-town people who arrive at the beginning of this book are not going to be happy until they realize that, and Castleview is the playground of the undead and the undying. The world that people know is just borrowed from those folk, except that in Castleview they do not lend it to the mundanes very much at all. Of course, the humans could move away, but they don't. Probably this means that people can get so used to anything that they don't even notice it most of the time except in socially acceptable ways. It may mean only that the castle captures them, but I doubt that.

And that's all.

* *There's no trace of any blacks on the scene, and no trace of any blacks ever on the scene, which is a little strange for an Illinois town of this type.*

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Carve the Sky, Alexander Jablokov (Morrow, cloth, 288pp, $18.95)

THE STUPIDEST of stories are often those about artists and art. This is because such novels are almost invariably the naive outpourings of immature writers who are still quite impressed at their own lofty status as artists. They create stories in which artists are tortured, tragic souls

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whose outpourings are the most important things ever to happen in the history of the human race. These stories only appeal to people who wish they were artists, or artists who are deeply in love with themselves.

I know about such stories. I've read many, started reading more, and even wrote a couple.

With that out of the way, let me tell you about *Carve the Sky*. This is Alexander Jablokov's first novel. He has been known as an extraordinarily talented, interesting writer since his short fiction first started appearing back in the late 70s. But he has not been *widely* known, because his publications, however excellent, have been so brief and so infrequent.

If you had *told* me that Jablokov's first novel was about art connoisseurs tracking down some strange, beautiful, anomalous sculptures by a dead genius, I would have winced, "knowing" that Jablokov, like so many others, had succumbed to the narcissistic impulse.

I would have been dead wrong. *Carve the Sky* is actually a gripping mystery, with all the action and danger of a thriller. It is also a gallery of fascinating characters, all believable and easily distinguished from each other (a rare thing!). And, as in all his work, Jablokov's writing is both clear and scintillating. His style almost never calls attention to itself, and yet again and again the reader is granted that frisson of recognition that something powerful and true has been stated so perfectly that it is as if it had never been spoken before.

Let me also indulge my personal tastes: I don't really enjoy reading stories that make me dwell in bleak and cynical worlds where characters all act from the basest or most pathetic of motives — yet an unfortunate proportion of fiction with literary pretensions seems to be set in such worlds. Despite the fact that *Carve the Sky* has its full share of the bleaker aspects of humanity, Jablokov has nevertheless charged his novel with the life and vigor that come when characters are driven at least as often by love and hope, by loyalty and gratitude and admiration, as they are by hate and despair, by resentment and vengeance and contempt.

Jablokov's future universe is well invented and fascinating, especially the art. Most "future art" stories start from the assumption that audience-repelling non-representational art is not only permanent, but permanently "new" and "revolutionary." Jablokov actually understands what art history shows: This, too, shall pass. There is no reason to think that two hundred years from now, the canon of great artists

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of the past will particularly resemble our current canon. And Jablokov writes so intelligently about his invented, nonexistent art and artists that the art history in *Carve the Sky*, both real and invented, feels seamless, completely of a piece. And that, my friends, is one of the hardest things science fiction writers ever attempt — to place their future histories into the balance with real history. Most fail. In fact, until reading this novel, I might have been tempted to say that *all* who attempt it fail, or at least succeed imperfectly. (And don't throw Heinlein's Future History at me — it was one of the silliest and shallowest of futures, even before real history overtook it.)

I'm still studying this book to determine how Jablokov brought it off. I think his technique is akin to scientific black-boxing — you never describe the art piece itself in great detail, and you never try to evoke a response from the reader to a direct apprehension of the art. At the same time, Jablokov is very careful to create attitudes-toward-art in his characters that differ from each other and from attitudes in our own time, not just at a superficial level (remember that absurd laser "art" bit that destroyed the second act of Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*!) but at fundamental levels, so that art feels like a wholly new experience throughout *Carve the Sky*.

But my own interest in Jablokov's technique should not distract you from his real achievement. You don't have to think seriously about these questions unless you want to. *Carve the Sky* can be read as sumptuous hard sf or hard-boiled detective fiction, as a literary tour-de-force or a serious examination of a community of characters, and it's hard to imagine an intelligent reader who will not be satisfied — nay, delighted. Write down the title and author, and be prepared to special-order it, Morrow's marketing of hardcover sf being sometimes only a step and a half above shredding the unbound signatures. This book is something special.

Just a Dream, Chris Van Allsburg (Houghton-Mifflin, picture book, $17.95)
On Christmas Eve, Peter Collington (Knopf/Borzoi, picture book, $14.95)
Old Mother West Wind, Thornton W. Burgess illustrated by Michael Hague (Henry Holt, picture book, $18.95)

Chris Van Allsburg is a genius, an author-artist of compelling vision and stunning originality. Previous books of his — most notably *The Mysteries of Harris*

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Burdick and *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* — have set parents and children imagining the most marvelous stories.

Unfortunately, with *Just a Dream*, Van Allsburg falls prey to Preachment Syndrome. His audience has hitherto loved him for his subtlety and the freedom he gives them, but Van Allsburg does not trust us to continue to imagine for ourselves. Now he must bludgeon us to make sure we Think Correct Thoughts while reading his book. Never before have his illustrations counted for so little, relying for their meaning on the most quotidian of text; never before has he shown himself to be such a shallow thinker. Having jumped on the environmentalist bandwagon, he confesses with every page that he has no understanding of the science of ecology, only a full knowledge of the most puerile of party-line environmentalism. For instance, cutting down trees is not, per se, the problem — monocultures, erosion, and irresponsible deforestation are — and human life would be difficult indeed if we concluded that *all* tree-cutting was bad. Yet that is what his book implies.

Why oh why, asked the reviewer plaintively, do creative geniuses so often come to believe that because they understand *something*, they understand *everything*! Van Allsburg would have nothing but contempt for a scientist who published illustrations showing as much ignorance of artistic technique as Van Allsburg's book shows of his ignorance of science. And why oh why, whined this reviewer for the umptieth time, do storytellers constantly forget that their work is most truthful and persuasive when the messages are intuitively and unconsciously created and received? Tell a good story well, and you will also succeed as a preacher; tell stories in order to preach, and you will fail as preacher *and* storyteller.

In contrast to Van Allsburg at his worst is a new (to me, at least) illustrator/storyteller named Peter Collington whose completely wordless picture book *On Christmas Eve* is a delight. Dedicated "to chimneyless children everywhere," the book tells exactly how Santa Claus gets that last-minute letter and delivers presents to a home without a hearth. With charm, wit, imagination, and a deft style that combines primitivesque drawing with often subtle texture and color, this is the illustrator's art at its finest. Give yourself a present by searching out this book now, no matter *when* this column appears — and I suspect many of you will be ordering up copies of this book to give *next* Christmas.

Collington's book bids to be a

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classic; Thornton W. Burgess's animal stories are time-tested classics already. I grew up on these books, which, to my view, are the finest of the talking-animal stories that really are for young children (Felix Salten's *Bambi* is much too disturbing to be read to most six-year-olds). Because I came to Burgess first, I never could stomach the icky sweetness of Beatrix Potter. (Potter-lovers, please don't write to me — I agree with you in advance that this opinion reveals my utter worthlessness as a critic and as a human being, but it's the opinion I have, and I must bear it manfully.) As for *The Wind in the Willows*, it seemed to me that the characters had been purged of all their animalness, which never happens with Burgess's creatures.

Those of you who, like me, have fond memories of Reddy Fox, Bowser the Hound, Johnny Chuck, and Billy Mink will feel yourselves right at hime in *Old Mother West Wind* — all the more because of Michael Hague's faithful, real-seeming illustrations. Hague's drawing technique is sometimes not up to his composition and his pallette, but the over-all effect is so rich and pleasing that small flaws are easily forgiven. As for you who have never known Burgess, I cannot guess whether his works can reach yet another generation of adults, but I would be surprised if they did not delight the children of the 90s as much as they did us who grew up in the 40s and 50s.

The Best of the Best I Read

I don't pretend to have read every sf and fantasy book published — but I have picked up a whole lot of them and read a page or even a chapter. Of those that I found interesting enough to continue reading to the end, I liked many of them enough to review them in print; and of those, I do have my favorites. Looking back with some months' perspective, let me remind you of my favorites:

Fantasy. In a year that saw Ellen Kushner's *Thomas the Rhymer*, Tom de Haven's *Walker of Worlds*, and R.A. McAvoy's *Lens of the World*, it was very hard indeed to set these aside in favor of any book. But Charles de Lint's masterwork, *The Little Country*, must stand as the finest novel of fantasy in 1990. All these books still live in my memory; but where the Kushner suffered a bit from its brevity and the de Haven and the McAvoy were the opening volumes of series, *The Little Country* is complete in itself. De Lint's career can no longer be described as promising; he has fulfilled his promise; he has arrived.

Science Fiction. Rudy

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Rucker's *The Hollow Earth* was wonderful fun, Robert Charles Wilson's *The Divide* was quietly brilliant and disturbing, and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* shows a proven master at the top of his form; but I must give the nod to the new guy, Robert Sawyer, whose first novel, *Golden Fleece,* is a tightly plotted mystery, terrific sensawunda sci-fi, and thriller with a character worth believing in and caring about. What will Sawyer do for an encore? This is one case where I wouldn't mind seeing a sequel — and real soon now, too.

Young Adult. I wish I saw more of these books to choose from — Young Adult editors are still oblivious to the fact that many of you who read this column are eager to find new YA fantasy and science fiction to buy as gifts (or — if you're like me — for yourself!). Where almost every adult sf and fantasy book arrived unbidden at my doorstep, I have to search out the YA titles myself, which is at best a hit-and-miss operation. Still, I am not at all dissatisfied with my favorite of the year, Lynne Reid Banks's *The Fairy Rebel,* a perverse little romp with a puckish punk fairy who finds that the only way to survive herself is to overthow the tyrannical queen.

Picture Book. An easy choice this year, though as always there were many beautiful entries. Peter Collington's *On Christmas Eve* is not *just* a Christmas book — it's a loving fantasy that stretches the illustrator's art.

Computer Game. In a year that saw *Starflight II* and *Star Control,* both wonderful games that give you a chance to play in space as you never have before, I still must point out some brilliant fantasy story games from the company I'm associated with, Lucasfilm Games. Brian Moriarty's *Loom* is a groundbreaking medieval fantasy that frustrates die-hard gamers but welcomes story-lovers who don't thrive on frustration — especially kids and women, long excluded from the try-not-to-die puzzle games that have dominated this genre. Ron Gilbert's *Monkey Island* is more traditional as a game, but this Caribbean ghost story is the first computer game I've ever played that made me laugh out loud. I hope you'll forgive my touting products of a company that I'm involved with. I don't praise their games because I work with them; I work with them because Lucasfilm is creating games that excite me with their storytelling possibilities.

Still, it is only *one* possible direction, and I suspect that a great many computer gamers will agree wth my choice for sf/fantasy game-of-the-year: Accolade's *Star Control,* by Fred Ford, Paul Reiche III, and a

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whole slew of other people. This game may be the ultimate space-battle simulation, and if you have ever been thrilled by military space stories, this game will make it all come real to you. The science fiction of it is richly inventive, the design and programming are adroit and stylish, and the visuals are stunning.

(Even here I can't escape from possible charges of bias. It wasn't until I was looking up credit-line information, *after* naming *Star Control* as my favorite sf-fantasy computer game of 1990, that I discovered that the credit page ends with the statement: "Inspired by the Works of Fiction of: Orson Scott Card, Larry Niven, Andre Norton, David Brin, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Jack Vance, Alan Dean Foster, Keith Laumer, A.E. Van Vogt, E.E. 'Doc' Smith, Joe Haldeman, Dan Simmons, Fred Saberhagen and 100 worthy others." The sheer flattery of being placed on such a list is certainly enough to turn the head of the most modest of writers, which I have never claimed to be. But let's look at it this way: Unlike the creator of *Star Wars*, these gamewrights had the grace to give credit to the dreamers whose dreams they are bringing to life for us. That they include my name on the list should not distract from the fact that they printed the list at all.)

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Joe Haldeman makes a welcome return to F&SF with a story about a Commune Theater in California in the mid-sixties, a time when nothing seemed normal, which may not prepare you for the startling events in . . .

Images

By Joe Haldeman

THE ONLY REASON I can tell this story is that you aren't going to believe it. I'll still change the names and locations, to be on the safe side. I can't afford to be called a lunatic. I'm a respectable family man now, with a good, safe job.

I was just the opposite back in the middle sixties: no job, no family, and nothing like respectability. I did a year in Vietnam and came back rootless, rattled; drifted into the easy-dope, easy-sex subculture on the West Coast. Flower child.

Let's call it San Diego. I was pretty much in demand at the antiwar rallies. Always was a good public speaker, and besides was physically striking; six foot four, broad-shouldered, still stacked with hard muscle from twelve months of humping a heavy machine gun and eight hundred rounds of ammo through the jungle. Handlebar mustache and head shaved except for a pigtail. Combat boots and faded fatigues covered with peace & love patches. Groovy.

One time there was this less-than-lukewarm rally. No cops showed

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up, and the people just stood around and agreed with each other. After a couple of hours, we said fuck it, and went downtown to a guy's house to get stoned, the six or seven of us who had tried to get the thing moving.

His "pad" — and we did call them pads — was a loft above a big old dilapidated theater. The theater had last seen use as a porno palace, and still had fading posters advertising *High School Virgins, Lickety Split,* and other moist classics. We scored some hash and Thai sticks and got a couple of gallons of raw Chianti to wash them down.

Turned out the guy's uncle owned the theater, and was letting him stay upstairs rent-free so long as he kept an eye on things. There was a legal injunction against using the theater to show movies for a certain period of time, "Tom" said, but his uncle was game for anything else that might bring in some money. This is where the big coincidence comes in: Tom had been heavily into drama in high school, and he had the notion of turning the place into a live theater. Anybody here know how to act?

Turned out that four of us had worked with plays in high school or college — and I was definitely the senior member of the firm, since I'd been a drama major for two years, before I dropped out and got drafted. I'd done leads in *Shrew* and *Salesman* and had dozens of smaller parts; I also knew a little about makeup, lighting, stage managing, and so forth. So the Mandala Commune Theater was born that night, in a pleasant buzz of hash and cheap wine. We celebrated by getting a couple of pepperoni pizzas and sprinkling them with Hawaiian Red instead of oregano, which was probably a culinary disaster, but we would've eaten the cardboard box if you'd put dope on it.

There were lots of antiwar, anti-establishment scripts floating around then. We started with one called *Pig Farm,* which required a cast of five women and six men, at least one of the men black. We asked around, and wound up with Newton Spears playing the lead.

Newt was a soft-spoken country boy from Alabama who claimed to be a high school dropout. He was smart, though, and a natural actor. He had total control over his accent, and could memorize a page of dialogue in ten minutes. His body language was fantastic: when he stepped on the stage, he *was* that character, period.

So how come you've never heard of him? Maybe you have. Not by any name like Newton Spears, of course. I like to call him Newt because of one time he sort of looked like one.

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Pig Farm was a big success. Newt played the part of a rookie cop who sees the light and winds up in a sort of I-Led-Three-Lives situation, working for the Revolution while outwardly being a model young officer. Good sex scenes. We filled at least half the house every night for three months, with a lot of people coming in night after night, bringing friends.

It was great fun. After the audience filed out, we all went down to the green room and split the night's take. After raking out a third for the owner, everybody got one share of the remainder — actor, director (that was me), set designer, writer — with two shares going for theater expenses and one share for beer and dope on the weekends. Each person's share came to about forty bucks a night, which was plenty, in 1967, to stay comfortable on. Even high on, if you weren't into anything exotic.

A lot of us did have exotic habits in those days, but what the hell. You find out somebody was into needle-candy or whips and chains; hey, that's cool; you do your thing and I'll do mine and it's beautiful. I kept my habit secret, though, because it *wasn't* cool; it was kind of silly and nasty. I was a compulsive voyeur. Ever since I got back from Vietnam. Hard to write that down even now, more than twenty years later, even though you can't know who I am. I don't do it anymore, but I'm rather glad I did it then. If I hadn't been a compulsive peeper, I would never have uncovered the interesting secrets of Newton Spears and Lydia Held.

Newt's secret was earthshaking, mind-boggling, and would change the world if anyone would believe it, but you won't. Lydia's secret changed only two small worlds, hers and mine.

The theater had been a live theater before it became a movie house, so we had a stage and backstage and, underneath, equipment rooms and two dressing rooms. I studied the layout and, late one night, let myself into the women's dressing room, where I drilled one scientifically placed hole, hiding it behind a mirror from which I had scraped off a small patch of silvering. The other side of the wall was a room we used for costume storage; the hole went through into a walk-in closet that nobody had any use for, since some vandal had trashed it. Me, actually. So there were just a bunch of boxes stacked there, floor to ceiling, conveniently making a little room inside the little room.

I spent many hours in there, waiting, watching, jerking off. It seems strange now. California in 1967 was a Happy Hunting Ground for anybody in search of sex. But I'd been burned badly in Vietnam by whores, a

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double whammy of simultaneous syphilis and gonorrhea, and the months of agony made me weird about sex, leery of physical contact with women. And the syphilis had been the resistant kind; it went into bad lesions that left ugly scars. I couldn't imagine showing them to anyone, explaining. What did you do in the war, Daddy? Well, I didn't wear a rubber.

Not a sensible attitude — in some circles, such scars were merit badges — but in those days I was not quite sensible. Not quite sane. And I was taking all manner of substances to keep sanity a safe distance away. In fact, if I had seen Newt do it only once, I might have shrugged it off as a hallucination. Acid flashback or whatever. But it didn't happen only once.

I often went into my darkened closet at night, long after anyone had a legitimate reason for being in the dressing room. Several of the women lived with their parents, and used the place for privacy, during or after dates. There was a couch almost directly across from my peephole, and once or twice a week, it saw pretty heavy use, lesbian and straight. I would sit in a hard chair and doze lightly. The slightest sound from the dressing room would wake me up. I would reach for the Vaseline and watch the show.

One night I woke to the sound of soft footsteps, and was surprised to see Newt in there, alone. He was standing in front of the full-length mirror. He undressed with seductive languor, never taking his eyes off his own reflection. Then came what I thought was the acid working.

His brown skin lightened to the palest Caucasian color, Scandinavian. His hair grew out into an impossibly large Afro, then turned blonde and fell softly around his shoulders. His shoulders narrowed, and he shrank nearly a foot. He grew breasts, and his genitals disappeared — actually retracting into his body — and became a female slit inside pale silky pubic hair as his waist narrowed and his hips and buttocks filled out. Then he, or she, or it, went to the rack and selected a slinky maroon dress and slipped it on. Then he got up close to the mirror and stared: makeup appeared, and his hair stood up and styled itself. He gave a musical laugh, high-pitched, and walked out swaying.

When I heard the exit door upstairs slam, I rushed quietly up and peeked out onto the street. Newt didn't go very far, just to the first corner. There he/she leaned against the wall, elaborately lit a cigarette, and proceeded to loiter. With obvious purpose.

So Newton Spears had gone from black actor to blonde hooker in

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about three minutes. Far, far-out, as we said at the time; far fucking out. That first time, I decided it was just drugs, and figured the best treatment for it would be a couple of quarts of beer and a long snooze. I went out the back way to the deli down the street and bought whatever was cheapest. I did return to the little room to consume it, though, rather than going home. I wondered whether Newt would come back and do his act in reverse. I wondered what I would do if he did.

He did come back, about three in the morning, and he wasn't alone. There were two sailors with him. They all stripped down and proceeded to perform every kind of dickage possible without a chandelier. Normally it would have been a terrific turn-on, but I watched them go at it with a kind of growing horror. Not because Newt was actually a boy. Homophobia aside, either I was crazy, or Newt was no more a boy than he was a girl. I was afraid he was going to turn into a tiger or an octopus or something. A big blob of sizzling protoplasm like the Steve McQueen movie.

He didn't. They got their rocks off a couple of times, and then joked around with Newt a little and asked her out to breakfast. She declined, saying it had been a long night for her, she needed a shower and sleep.

After they dressed and left, she stood in the middle of the room, listening intently. When the upstairs door slammed, she peeked out and made sure there was no one in the corridor, and then came back to the mirror and stripped and studied her body. She made the breasts larger, then smaller, and experimented with other proportions. She made her pubic hair disappear back into the skin, and then the hair on her head as well, which made her look like an extraordinarily detailed department store mannequin. Then she turned back into Newton Spears and ran his body through changes. Grotesque ones: arms half a foot long, dick down past his knees, and extra hand growing out of his head. I had the feeling I was watching a sort of Royal Canadian Air Force exercise program for creatures from Alpha Centauri. Practice practice practice. Finally he dressed and left.

I thought there was still a chance that it was an elaborate hallucination, though I'd never had one so detailed and prolonged before. And it didn't have that ethereal "this is real, but it's not happening" feel to it. But then, I'd never mixed psilocybin with LSD and hash before. So I kept watching and waiting, for weeks and months, keeping fairly straight.

While feeling guilty about peeping on my friends. That was unusual, according to the literature. I'd gone to several libraries and read every-

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thing they had on voyeurism, which wasn't much. Because in its milder forms, it's an impoliteness rather than a disorder. Not many normal men would pass up the chance to look through a peephole into a women's dressing room, if there were no chance of being caught. It's less normal, though, to go so far as to drill the hole. To actually sit there for hours on end, staring and masturbating, constitutes obsessive-compulsive behavior. And causes eyestrain. Not to mention chafing.

Two sources, though, pointed out that obsessive-compulsive voyeurs never get their rocks off looking at people they know. These authorities also carry on about how peeping is supposed to give voyeurs feelings of power and superiority over the people they're looking at, but, to me, it felt quite the opposite. I felt as if *they* had me in *their* power, governing this whole part of my life. My so-called sex life. Every now and then, I would go downtown and rent a woman, just to remind myself what it was like, look-ma-no-hands, but while I was with her, I would close my eyes and think about my friends. Especially Lydia Held. And then go back to my little room to wait and watch, sated but not satisfied.

I would much rather have been on the other side of the peephole, at least with most of the women in the troupe, and honestly wouldn't give a damn whether someone was watching us or not. But whenever I would find myself working toward asking one of them out, I'd remember the pain and the scars, and my tongue wouldn't work. Most of the women I would ask, I got to see eventually, through the little hole, and so we had sex in a way.

And until Newt came along, I was not all that unhappy with the arrangement. "I may not be normal," as the Willie Nelson song has it, "but nobody is." At least I wasn't flashing little girls or fondling shoes.

But then there was Lydia, pretty in a country-girl, well-scrubbed, Ipana-smile way. I desired her as much as I did any of the other actresses; maybe more, because her personal habits made her in a sense unattainable. She always changed costume in the ladies' room, and then came into the dressing room to apply her makeup. Most of the others sat around in skivvies or less until the last possible moment, since it was pretty warm down there, but Lydia always came in fully dressed. She probably took a little kidding the first time she did it, but by the time I had my vantage point, the others just accepted her eccentricity.

She was a *nice* person, always doing little favors, saying encouraging

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things. At times I thought she was especially nice to me, and if I could have gotten up the, what, courage? — to ask any of them out, it would have been her. But I was as set in my sexual ways as any monk.

It was kind of dangerous for me to go peeping while the girls were changing costumes, since during that time someone was likely to come looking for the director, but that just made it more exciting, the fear of discovery. In the short time I stood there, I would usually just glance at my naked and near-naked friends, and then concentrate on Lydia, fully clothed, being as intent on lipstick and powder as I was on her hidden curves.

It's relevant here to point out that Newt had quite a reputation among the crew: it was widely assumed that he had been to bed with all the women at one time or another. In fact, I'd seen him with three of them. But not Lydia.

We went from *Pig Farm* to *The Pat & Dick Show* to *Home for a Soldier.* I saw Newt transform himself several times more into a woman, and once into a light-chocolate-skinned dude so handsome as to be almost a cartoon gigolo.

It was during a *Home for a Soldier* intermission costume change that I got caught. I had my eye glued to the hole and had just unzipped, when someone cleared his throat softly behind me. I stuffed my wilting dick back inside and turned around. It was Newt.

"You do this often?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"Then you've seen me."

"Yes. I've seen you change."

"Everybody in there changes." He smiled. "We have to talk. Come to my place after the show?"

Rather than give me an address, he said he'd take me there. Any sensible person would have dived through the window and run to take the first Greyhound to anywhere. He had just admitted to being a creature straight from the pages of the *National Enquirer.* But I said sure, like to see your place. Maybe it's full of methane. Or the bodies of curious Earthlings hanging from their heels, drained of blood.

We'd done *Soldier* often enough that the director was superfluous, which was fortunate, as my mind was spinning through all sort of scenarios, none pleasant. When I left with Newt, it raised some eyebrows —

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since they never saw me with women, most of them assumed I was gay —and we took public transportation uptown a couple of stops, then went into an indoor lot and picked up Newt's car, a vintage Jaguar XK120. He tipped the boy who drove it up five dollars.

"Business is good," I said.

He shrugged. "Money."

We purred out to a condominium that overlooked the ocean, and Newt's key took the elevator to the penthouse. It was sparsely furnished, like a Japanese place: a few cushions here and there, lights and plants carefully spaced. The paintings on the walls were reproductions of subdued English watercolors and French impressionists.

Newt popped a cork and poured us each a large balloon glass of red wine and indicated a cushion by a low table. He handed me the glass and sat down across from me, a quick, precise, sinuous motion like a snake's strike in reverse. "Cheval Blanc 1953," he said, and we clinked glasses.

It was probably the best wine I would ever have. It might as well have been Welch's. "So what *are* you?" I said.

"An actor."

"I mean, really."

"'Actor' is actually about as close as your language can come to what I do." He plucked at his shirt. "This is my role, of course. Would you like to see the last role I played?"

"Sure."

Newton Spears melted and became a scaly purple lizard about eight feet long with yellow fangs that curved out over its lower jaw. Gossamer pink external gills waved from its neck. It yawned, mouth wide enough to swallow me whole, and a delicate black tendril weaved out from inside a large white tongue. It homed in on the wineglass and sucked it dry. The monster changed back into Newt.

"Those creatures are actually more civilized than humans. At least they don't have wars anymore, in spite of the blessings of high technology. They do suck blood for nutrition, though."

The smell of the lizard hung in the air, rank carrion clot and lavender. "That . . . that's what you really do look like?"

"When I choose to. I've been dozens of species."

"I mean when you really look like yourself."

"That's hard to explain." He rubbed his jaw. "This *is* what I look like,

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to you humans, or the big reptile, to its species, or this" — for a moment he became two intertwined beings of green flickering flame — "to them, and maybe fifty more, but they're all just three-dimensional projections of my five-dimensional self. Frozen in four dimensions; your space-time. In the sense that your shadow on a wall or on the ground is what *you* look like, in a way. Though you could be white or yellow or brown, or have profound physical abnormalities, without the shadow being different.

"And the analogy with acting is real: you find the character within yourself and 'project' that character to the audience. It's not really you, though, no matter how well you convince the audience, or even yourself."

"So this is what you do? You go around to various planets and impersonate the natives?"

"That's *how* I do what I do. My actual job is collecting specimens for a thing like a museum, or a zoo."

I had a sudden chill. The only way out of the penthouse was down the elevator whose key was in Newt's pocket — no! Had to be a fire escape....

Newt laughed. "You should see yourself. I'm not going to kidnap you and take you away in my flying saucer. The specimens I collect are cells. Sperm cells, in the case of humans. That's why I take the forms you've seen, the prostitutes. I collect millions of cells every night, not to mention hundreds of dollars." He made a sweeping gesture. "It makes the job more comfortable."

"So what are you going to do now? Now that one of us knows your secret?"

He swirled his wine around the glass. "That makes less difference than you might think. My identity was exposed several years ago, in a German tabloid, pictures and all. I just changed shape and left. No reputable news outlet would carry the story, of course. I could do the same thing here. But you wouldn't gain anything by telling the world what I am — and you'd lose your star."

"You mean you'd stay?"

"Sure. As long as you don't tell anybody else. I like the people and the situation. It's a good area for collecting specimens. I'm even willing to

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bribe you." He shimmered and changed, becoming a voluptuous brunette in a filmy pink Frederick's of Hollywood thing.

"Looks familiar."

"To you and a hundred million other men. I'm Lena Curriet, this month's Playmate of the Month." He shimmered and changed again, to Merilee Larson, his costar in *Soldier*, wearing a carelessly open robe. "Maybe you'd prefer something closer to home."

I swallowed saliva. "Lydia Held."

"Sorry." He turned back into Newt. "I could do an approximation. But I've never seen her undressed. Neither have you, I suppose."

I shook my head. "I've heard the others say she dresses in the ladies' room."

"Inside the stall, as a matter of fact. I've checked. Peculiar for a person who acts, to be so modest." He looked at me closely. "I understand. She's the only one you haven't been able to watch while you stimulate yourself. So you desire her especially."

"You make it sound so romantic."

He shrugged. "It's only a process to me. Maybe I could help you. Do you have sex with women — I mean the usual way?"

"Prostitutes every now and then."

"I'll warn you if you ever run into me. Wait here." Newt disappeared into a back room and closed the door. After a couple of minutes, he returned with a small glass vial with a half-inch of colorless liquid in it. "Do you know what pheromones are?"

"Huh-uh. Some kind of drug?"

"I suppose so, in this case. Put just a drop on each wrist, then get Lydia alone with you — or maybe get her alone with you *first*. Any woman around who smells that is going to find you irresistible."

"It's an actual aphrodisiac?"

"In a way. Your science doesn't have anything like it yet. I use the male version when business gets slow." I stared at the vial, shook it. "You're not sure?" he said.

"Newt . . . what I said about prostitutes, I mean, that's *it*. I haven't had sex without paying for it since before I was in the army, five or six years."

"So start with Lydia."

"It's not that simple. I have scars." He shrugged. "I mean on my *dick!*"

"Big deal. Most women wouldn't even notice."

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"Sure, they wouldn't."

"I've been one. And I seen more dicks than a urologist. But if it bothers you, just do it in the dark. Lydia would probably prefer it, since she doesn't want to undress even in front of women."

"In the dark she'll still feel the scars."

"No, she won't. *You* feel them, which I suppose is your problem, or part of it."

I could feel myself blushing. "You must think I'm pretty weird."

"No. Look. Every other Thursday I have a guy who takes me home and dresses me up in a big diaper and has me 'make a mistake' in it. Then he cleans me up and tells me what a bad girl I am while I suck his cock. That, I would classify as weird. What you do is pretty ordinary."

"Spy on women and jerk off."

"You can put it that way if it helps you deal with it. But what you actually do is have sex with a variety of people without any emotional connection involved."

"Or *physical* connection."

"That's not unusual, either. Half the people who are fucking tonight are thinking about somebody who's not in the same room with them."

"You know an awful lot about it for someone who's not even human."

"I have an interesting perspective." He slipped a folded twenty-dollar bill under the wineglass. "I called a cab. It ought to be here in a minute or two. Drink up and go to her."

"Uh . . . I don't know her address."

"I gave it to the cab: 213 West Palm, Apartment 3."

"You know a lot about a lot of things."

"It's the extra two dimensions. Get outa here."

SHE LIVED on the other side of town, but the cab ride wasn't long enough. What would I say . . . Why don't we go out for a beer? Thought I'd drop by and talk about the script? May I watch you undress? Here, sniff this stuff.

We passed a flower stand next to a drugstore, and I had the cabbie stop. Some roses and some rubbers. With a rubber, she wouldn't be able to feel the scars.

But then I felt like a real kid, waiting there with a bouquet after I knocked on her door. What if she broke out laughing? I could always

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use the rubbers the way we used to. Fill them with water and drop them on police cars.

She looked quizzical she opened the door, but smiled at the flowers. "Come on in. I thought you were out with Newton."

"We just had some stuff to talk about. Didn't take long." She said the place was a mess, which it wasn't, by my standards; find a place to sit down while she put the roses (which I had dabbed with the pheromone stuff) in some water. There was a beanbag chair big enough for two, encouraging. I sank into it and surveyed the peace posters and large record-and-book collection on neat brick-and-board shelves. I put a drop of the magic liquid onto each wrist.

"Like some Coke?" she called from the kitchen, and I said yes, not knowing whether it would be brown liquid or white powder. I suspected the former, and was right.

She gave me the Coke and put the vase of roses on a low table next to the beanbag, then sat down on the floor in front of me, cross-legged. She was blushing. "Nobody has brought me flowers since I was in high school."

"I guess it was a dumb idea."

"Oh no." She leaned over and tipped the vase to smell them. "Nice. What did you and Newton talk about?"

"Well . . . among other things . . . you."

She looked at the floor, and there was a long, awkward silence. "Everybody says you're gay. Not that it—"

"I'm not. Just shy that way, uh, since the army. And . . . peculiar, maybe."

"So am I," she said, almost inaudibly, still looking at the floor. Did she mean shy, or peculiar?

"Would you like to go out or something?"

"No." She studied her hand and picked at a fingernail. Then she turned around languorously and leaned back so her head was on the beanbag next to me. Her cheek against my thigh. She closed her eyes and smiled. "Let's just stay here and talk."

We didn't talk much. The magic liquid worked fast. I started to make the usual sort of physical overtures, and she grabbed my hand and said no, let's just go straight to bed. As Newt had predicted, she preferred darkness; she even went into the bedroom first and turned out all the lights.

That made it more exciting in an odd way. She led me by the hand to

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the bed, just a mattress on the floor, and asked me to put my clothes where I could find them in the dark. "The only think I ask," she said, "is that you leave before morning. And don't ask why."

I agreed, and was sensible enough not to reveal that I knew about her phobia.

The details would be interesting to you, but I don't want to write them down. It lasted a long time, various permutations, and was wonderful, I think for both of us. But I was exhausted and slept well past daybreak. I suppose at some level, Lydia actually wanted me to.

I woke with light streaming in through the high window. I blinked at a forest of dicks.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked a few times more, and then could properly interpret what I was looking at. There was a montage of photographs taped to the ceiling over the bed, and down the wall; hundreds of male members in every state from repose to ejaculation.

"I get them in the mail," she said in a quiet voice. "Mostly magazines for gay men. I go through the pictures and cut out the ones I like best. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"A lot of men do the same thing," I said.

"It's all right for *men*."

"Anything you do is all right by me," I said, and turned to her, but she rolled away, wrapped like a mummy in the top sheet, and started crying.

"I do even stranger—"

"You don't know half of it!" she almost shouted. "Or you do know just half of it." She slowly unwound herself from the sheet and stood in front of me, naked, shoulders slumped, looking down at herself.

Her body was a road map of crisscrossing pink scars. She looked like she had been taken apart and put back together. "Three years and seven months ago," she said. "Sutter's Mill Road. I was riding my bicycle, and a semi hit me and dragged me a hundred yards. They picked up pieces and put them in a cooler. Most of them didn't take." She cupped a breast gingerly, as if it still hurt. "This is completely fake. Just a silicone bag covered with skin from my . . . my bottom. A lot of it's like that." She sat on the bed with her back to me; it was as badly scarred as her front.

I hadn't felt the scars in the dark. Just softness, heat, wetness, passion.

"They paid all the medical expenses and settled out of court for three quarters of a million dollars. It's a living, the interest on that; a pretty

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good living. Not much of a life. You're the first man I've had in four years, and I feel like I've cheated you."

I didn't know what to say. I was feeling too many emotions at once. "The scars . . . they don't make any difference. Or they do, but I still think you're beautiful. Look at this." I meant to show her my own scars, but that's not exactly what she saw. She laughed and flowed across the bed like a hungry animal.

The theater turned into pure chaos when Newton Spears disappeared, despite what he'd assured me, the day after Lydia and I got together. Another male lead came out of the woodwork in a couple of weeks, though, with a suspiciously similar chameleonlike facility. I never called him on it; he went on to become a rather famous character actor in the movies.

I took the magic vial to a friend who was a graduate student in organic chemistry, and he spent most of a weekend analyzing it. Plain tap water, as far as he could tell. I wasn't too surprised. Plain tap water plus two extra dimensions of insight into human nature.

After several days of some intensity, we did get around to discussing my own scars, and what they meant to me, and whether there was something going on with all this scar business that could ultimately be hurtful to both of us. Without putting it in so many words, I guess we decided that if things didn't work out, we could always just crawl back into our holes.

Holes and holes and holes. I showed her my peephole, which both amused and shocked her, and closed it up with putty. She took down her photo gallery, at least for the duration. That's twenty-five years, so far.

I've never told her about Newt, and sometimes I wonder whether he ever happened, the changes, the night of revelation. So much from those times is fluid, memory merging with imagination. Drugs, but not just drugs. Sometimes it feels as if someone else went to Vietnam and told me all about it, told me well enough and hard enough to make it real. Then our dreams cracked by the hammerblows of King and Kennedy, blood in Chicago and flames in Washington, all the sweetness and loving kindness hardening into political reality that crystallized into the baroque fantasies of Watergate and Reagan; America drifting rudderless into the century we never thought we'd live to see. Hippies forty years old? Fifty? Hippies on Social Security?

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Whatever. I met a creature straight out of the *National Enquirer* who gave me and Lydia a measure of love and peace in this mad world. Even a daughter unbelievably fat with grandchild, and me still a shaved-head hippie with a ponytail, gray now, making a pretty good living off other middle-aged hippies, selling dreams, maybe biding time. With age, you learn that revolution has a slow meaning, too. Things come around again. My daughter's a Realtor, but her child will be something else.

So that's my story. And you don't believe it, unless you're Newt. That's O.K. Everything's fiction. Everything's true.

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Mary Caraker's new story is suspenseful SF about a young man from Earth, who lives up to some impossible expectations on a planet far from home.

The Sandwalk

By Mary Caraker

"CAA-LEB!"

The call issued across the mesa like the thin wail of a nightcrier. Caleb Laurent, crouching in the shade of a standing, chimney-shaped rock, frowned when he heard it, but did not respond. He edged around enough, still keeping in the shadow, to watch his mother's tiny figure as she stood for a moment at the door of the stone hut, her hands to her eyes, searching the scrub growth and boulders of the immediate landscape. When she gave up and disappeared inside, Caleb slumped against the hard surface and tried to ignore the gnawing pain of his empty stomach.

Inside the hut, his father and mother would be sitting down to their evening meal. They wouldn't worry unduly when he failed to appear. He was a service brat, after all, and though he was only thirteen, they had instilled in him well the value of rules. He was always home before dark. They would put his portion in the warmer, and he could dispose of it later. They would never know he hadn't eaten.

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It was the third day of his fast. On Epsilon Indi Sauron, the days were four hours longer than Earth-normal, and though, in the nine months he had been on the planet, Caleb's body clock had adjusted, he found himself now counting every missed meal.

He groaned and doubled himself over a closed fist. He had to quit thinking about food. Think about the walk, he told himself. Think about Tyset and how everything would change for both of them if his plan worked.

He gazed down at the broken canyon country that stretched to the south below the mesa: the black cliffs and dry gray washes, the thin lines of purple growth that marked the underground streams. Where one of the lines widened and became an irregular splotch of vegetation, he could see the roof-mounds of Tyset's village.

Tyset wouldn't be alone, hiding on a stretch of sun-baked rock. No, he'd be with the other twelve-year-old Ashmodi boys, in one of the cool, dark underground burrows. He'd have pipe music and the fumes of burning chotay to take his mind away from hunger pangs. Perhaps he'd already be experiencing a vision, and the coming sandwalk would be no more to him than a waking dream.

Forty kilometers, barefoot and naked, carrying only a flask of undiluted chotay. Burning sun and deadly patches of sinking sand.

Last year, Tyset said, three boys had not made it. Three out of ten. Sometimes it was worse, but sometimes also, on a lucky year, the seekers all emerged safe and touched with wisdom.

As would he and Tyset, Caleb vowed. He rose and stretched. He checked the hut again, then moved away from his shelter and headed toward the edge of the mesa. One more run, down the slope to the outcropping where he had hidden his clothes and shoes.

Once he got his rhythm, Caleb ran with ease, for all his empty stomach. Already his feet had toughened enough that he barely felt the small stones. After the weeks of conditioning, his leg muscles were hard, his lung capacity expanded to take in great gulps of the thin air. He kept up a steady, machinelike lope for a quarter of an hour, then turned and ran uphill. When his breath began to come with a catching pain and a film of sweat beaded his hairline, he stopped. He returned to his cache, dressed, and retraced his way up the slope at a slower pace.

There would be comments if he arrived breathless. He fingered the

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polished stone chips in his pocket, the spiked lorq feather and the fossil rocks. An excuse for his wanderings, if he should need one. Probably he wouldn't. His parents knew how lost he felt these days without Tyset. The coming ceremony had changed their routines, too. No longer allowed in the village, they spent the long days collating and recording. Working on the theory that was so important to them that it seemed to Caleb they sometimes forgot they even had a son.

Caleb's footsteps slowed even more as he approached the hut. *Primitive superstitions of the Ashmodi tribe on Sauron: new evidence that the collective subconscious extends beyond Earth's human family.* It would be a breakthrough in all of cultural anthropology as well as in the field of xeno-studies. Bill and Elena Laurent would further enhance their reputations, add even greater luster to the family name.

If that could be possible, Caleb thought, the familiar bitterness tightening his jaw. As if Grandfather Laurent hadn't done enough in that vein when SEF had actually named a planet after him.

Laurentius. How Caleb had always hated it whenever anyone made the connection. A person could never live up to such a name. To such a family.

Tyset's family had no impossible expectations for him. He had been showered by them with affection from birth, even though his body wasn't perfect, and after the sandwalk he would take his place as an honored man in the tribe. He would have glimpsed his future path, and he would even have made a first journey in his other form. Nothing could worry him again, or frighten him. Not the teasing of the other boys, because of his crooked leg, or the screaming of the nightcriers when they circled the village.

He had been so sure, explaining it all earnestly to Caleb, his chameleon eyes glowing with shifting, opaque colors. Caleb had thought it too strange to take seriously at first, as Tyset himself had been strange with those eyes and his lizard crest and his stiff scales instead of skin. His blood, though, was as warm as Caleb's, and so was the friendship he offered.

Elena and Bill had encouraged the friendship (and how grateful Caleb had been then for the sleep-teacher and the hours of language tapes that he had found so onerous on the outward voyage). Elena and Bill had spent their days in the village, questioning and listening, getting everything on record, while Caleb had roamed the canyons with Tyset and listened, too,

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in a different way, finding in the Ashmodi beliefs something that spoke to his soul.

Elena was dictating into her vocorder when Caleb entered the hut.

"These Ashmodi rituals invoking animal spirits parallel those of primitive Earth cultures too closely to be coincidental. Their coming-of-age rite is particularly significant in this regard. After fasting for four days, an Ashmodi youth must undergo both a physical and a mystical journey in which his companion animal spirit is revealed, and according to what happens to him, his future decided. Even though the participants are aware that they may not survive the ordeal, no one ever refuses." She looked up at Caleb. "Isn't there any way you can see Tyset? What I wouldn't give to know what's happening to him now!"

"You know I can't," Caleb mumbled. Of course you'd like to know, he thought. For your precious report. But do you really *care* about Tyset? About any of them?

"I just thought . . . since you two were such good friends, they might relax the rules." Elena tucked a stray wisp of hair into her neat bun. She was always perfectly groomed, even in the field station like this with wash water in a bucket. Unruffled and unflappable. The ideal of a SEF agent.

His father, too. Bill Laurent hunched over a viewer, frowning in concentration. He wore clean khakis, and there was no trace of stubble on his chin. A faultless, by-the-regs representative of Earth, of Space Exploratory Forces, of the family. He made a notation and slid the machine across the table to Elena. "There's no doubt about these pictographs," he said. "Look at these symbols. Here — the Ashmodi — and here, the Mother Earth of the American Hopi. And this one — the circle of the four powers. Exactly the same as the Lakota Medicine Wheel."

Elena studied the last figure. "In Lapland. In Africa. And now here." She turned back to Caleb. "What was it Tyset said about the symbol?"

"I told you." His voice was sharper than he intended.

His father cleared his throat warningly, and Caleb pointed to the diagram. "It means lots of things, but mostly the cycle of life. Birth and childhood, the sandwalk and maturity, the wisdom of the elders, childhood again. And here — the birth and death line is the same."

"I thought maybe you remembered something else. About the sandwalk, particularly. Wasn't Tyset at all frightened about it?"

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"I told you before, no." This time, Caleb said it softly. "None of them are." He hated it when they pumped him. *What did Tyset say? What did you talk about?* He had been fielding questions for months, ever since he had rebelled against wearing the recorder. Why couldn't they leave him alone?

Bill and Elena exchanged a glance. If they could open his head and extract its contents, Caleb thought, they'd do it without a qualm. He took his plate from the warmer. "I'll eat this outside," he said.

"You still have your lessons," his father reminded him. "Don't take too long."

Caleb walked away from the hut. The sun was nearly down, the sky a haze of purple and red. The first moon hung in faint outline: the shadow moon that Tyset said the nightcriers, the spirits-who-spoke, always drove away. Superstitions, Elena insisted. But neither she nor Bill had ever been able to capture or photograph one of the nocturnal creatures.

Caleb emptied his plate on a flat rock behind a thistle bush. Soy chicken and reconstituted greens. Ship rations, but the night feeders — criers or whatever — weren't particular. The food would be gone in the morning.

He pumped water from the well and drank deeply. His stomach felt better; there was no pain or nausea. Maybe, he thought, it was finally through protesting. He thumped its hardness and flexed his muscles. Physically, he was ready. Mentally, though . . . he knew he should be preparing himself as Tyset and the others were doing.

He stared at the horizon, into the palette of changing colors, trying to let his mind go free of his body. To make himself receptive to the spirit world.

He and Tyset had attempted it often, after exhausting days of following the tribe's herdbeasts. Perched on cliffs above the sparsely grassed rangeland, they had sat motionless and stared until darkness swallowed the last fiery finger.

That last time, Caleb had had to lead a shivering Tyset back to the herder's campfire. "I came close," Tyset had whispered. "I felt something wanting to enter me, but I was afraid and pushed it back. If I had had chotay. . . ."

The children were never allowed it, not until the time of the sandwalk. After that, of course, they were no longer children.

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Caleb and Tyset had found a spot away from the other herdboys to spread their bedrolls. "Before you came, I was always over there." Tyset indicated the fringe beyond the fire's warmth where Dak, who smelled bad, and Ongali, who had no father, dug themselves sleeping hollows.

"How could you stand it?" Caleb seethed with anger for his friend. "Did your father know how they treated you?"

"Of course. He said it would make me strong, in my other form. I had only to be patient."

"What does he think about me, about our being friends?"

Tyset hadn't answered. Caleb remembered how his own face had burned. He knew what all the adult Ashmodis thought of the softskins, but he hoped he was an exception. Now he knew better. Probably Tyset's father looked on the association as a strengthening ordeal, too.

Tyset was smaller than the other boys, and walked with a limp. He never complained, but Caleb could see that his leg often pained him. In the sandwalk, it was usually the weakest who fell from the trail.

His friend would never make it. Caleb had thought it before, but that night he had known it for a certainty. He had seen something in the sunset, too: a frail figure, arms extended above his head, the sand bubbling around him as he slowly sank into its depths.

"Soon we will start preparing. It is a special time. A . . . holy . . . time." Tyset's face, in the firelight, had been transfigured with emotion.

Couldn't you wait a year? Caleb had wanted to ask. Until you've grown taller? Until after I'm gone? It had been an effort not to speak, to protest, but he knew the SEF rules too well. Besides, anything he might say would only alienate Tyset.

"If only you were an Ashmodi," Tyset had said, grasping Caleb's arm. "If only we could go together!"

It was then Caleb had decided. He had said nothing to Tyset, to anyone. But to himself, he had pledged to follow Tyset on the sandwalk and see him through to safety.

This time, after staring into the sunset, Caleb closed his eyes and concentrated on the swirl of colors behind his eyelids. Nothing came to him, however, and he breathed out slowly in relief. At least he had seen no sinking figure. He took it as an omen that his plan was sure to work.

"Caleb, I'm waiting." He started at his father's voice, which was edged with impatience.

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Caleb sighed as he dragged his feet toward the hut. It would be the same as always — another session of him stumbling over the drills and his parents trying to hide their disappointment.

It would be worse than usual, in fact, since he hadn't studied at all that morning. If they even suspected what was in his mind . . . violating the first directive . . . he grew cold at the thought. Their condemnation was almost as frightening to him as the quicksand.

The recitation went as badly as Caleb had anticipated. He passed the chapter test, but just barely. A 75 percent, of course, wasn't good enough for a Laurent.

"What are we to do with you?" Bill leaned back in his chair, his arms folded. Elena bit her lip as a furrow appeared between her eyes.

Although Caleb knew that he was working at the grade level for his age, it meant nothing; his father at thirteen had been in his first year at the Academy. His mother, a child prodigy, too, had been privately tutored, but she had breezed through the equivalency exams when she and Bill had become a team.

"I . . . I had a headache this morning." Caleb wouldn't look at either of them.

"I don't mean just today," Bill said. "I had hoped, with Tyset out of the picture for a while, that you might settle down to some serious studying. We could use your help, too, with our report. That was the idea when. . . ." He stopped, cleared his throat, and continued. "Instead, you've been flightier than ever. Off wandering most of the day—"

"Here. I found these." Caleb emptied his pockets of the feather and the rocks and the stone spear tips.

His father did not glance at them. "We have more than enough artifacts."

"Is it Tyset?" Elena asked. "You know, you *have* to remain detached. It's the first rule of the scientific observer. You've known it from the first."

"Yes, yes, I know." If only they'd stop badgering him. They'd never understand, with their "scientific detachment." They'd never know what Tyset meant to him.

Bill lit the lamps, and Caleb sat down with his bookspools and his reader. Bill and Elena returned to their own work, each wrapped in a cocoon of silence.

In Tyset's house, the times he had visited, Tyset's father had shown

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the boys how to carve bone while the first grandfather had told stories of the Great Spirit and the early Ashmodis who roamed the land. Tyset's mother had sung, and they had all laughed when his baby sister had danced a few toddling steps. The older grandfather, even, had sat up in his bedroll and cackled.

Caleb pushed back his chair to get a drink of water, and Bill frowned. *One more day,* Caleb thought. He wished it could be sooner.

THE MORNING of the sandwalk, Caleb awoke for the first time with no sensation of hunger. The sight of breakfast revolted him, and he emptied his portion into the recycler as quickly as he could.

No one noticed. Bill and Elena were already at work, Elena busy with her eternal dictation. "Several of the Ashmodis spoke of the *shoen,* a state of euphoria induced by the fasting. They described it as 'surrendering to the spirit world.' Fjeld, in her twentieth-century study of indigenous Earth peoples, writes: 'The Lakota word *wakan* expresses an awareness and sensitivity to the infinitesimal mysterious and holy presence of the Great Spirit of Nature.' *Shoen* and *wakan*. . . ."

Elena's voice droned on, until it became a buzzing that drove all thought from Caleb's mind. He read his lessons in a daze, understanding nothing. When he stood, a wave of dizziness washed over him, and he grasped the table to keep from falling.

His father glanced at him worriedly. "What's the matter? Are you feeling ill?" He started to rise.

Caleb motioned him back. The wave receded, leaving him cold and clammy. His head felt light, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady. "No, I'm all right." He snapped the cover shut on his reader. "I'm through here; I'm going outside."

"Where?" Elena's quick frown matched Bill's.

"Just . . . around." Caleb's words sounded strange to his ears; as if they came from a distance. His parents, however, did not seem to notice. "But don't worry," he continued; "I won't go near the village or the sand plain. I'll be out there" — he pointed toward the sweep of mesa — "until it's all over."

"Don't you want to see the walkers come out?" Bill asked. "After all, it's the only part of the ceremony they'll let us watch."

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Caleb shook his head. The buzzing persisted, and he didn't trust himself to speak.

"You have to accept it," Elena said. "It's a part of life to them. You said it yourself." Her face softened. "I know — you're young, and it's difficult for you. Maybe it's better you don't come with us. What do you think, Bill?"

His father shrugged. "If he can't face up to it. . . ."

Caleb ignored the disapproval and put together a small pack, including a lunch, for appearance's sake. The sandwalk didn't start until noon, but he had to get to the plain early and slip onto it unobserved. He needed all the time he could get. He hadn't expected this debilitating weakness. . . .

He hadn't expected, either, that the length of the walk would be patrolled by Ashmodi graufriders. After scouting for an hour, still fighting spells of dizziness, he gave up. There was no way he could get in.

So much for his weeks of preparation! Caleb sat slumped in the dust of the rocky butte that overlooked the sand flats. It was as close as he could get without being spotted, and even then he was taking a chance. But what did it matter? What did anything matter now that all his plans to save Tyset were blasted?

A hot, dry wind blew from the desert to the south. A two-faced wind, the Ashmodis called it. Up on the plateau, it both burned and cooled, but on the flat below, it would trap the heat in a steaming blanket.

Overhead, the sun was approaching its zenith. The boys would be assembling. Tyset would be facing his ordeal.

Caleb crept toward the edge of the bluff. Those immediately below would likely never look up, and he could at least see Tyset off. See him for the last time.

Prone, Caleb gazed down at the scene below: the expanse of dry lake bed that extended for miles beyond the limits of his vision. Waves of heat shimmered over its cracked white surface, obscuring the faint path that wound between darker patches where the sand bubbled; where a single misstep meant a suffocating death.

Caleb shivered and tasted bile. Through the ringing in his ears, he could hear Tyset's voice. *Why should I be afraid? If the sand takes me, I'll only be free that much sooner. If it doesn't, I'll have my spirit brother to help me along the longer way.*

If only he could believe it! Caleb's fasting had brought him no *shoen*. He had hoped it would, that when he entered the course, he would be free

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of fear. He had hoped, too, farfetched as it might seem, that he would emerge with the proud eyes and firm step of an Ashmodi man.

Crazy, he thought now, cowering on the bluff. Below him the men and boys gathered. The first of the boys removed his vest and his loin-wrap, took a swallow of chotay while the circle of elders chanted, and started unsteadily down the trail.

The thin voices drifted up to Caleb, but he couldn't understand the words. The naked figure disappeared in the heat haze. It hadn't been Tyset; Caleb could tell from the size. Neither was the second figure, or the third. He strained to see more clearly, and made out the smallest of the figures about two-thirds of the way down the line.

Tyset! The pain in Caleb's throat threatened to choke him. Without thinking, almost without willing it, he began to scramble down the bluff. This wasn't how he had planned it, but it seemed there was no other way. If only they would admit him. . . . In his haste, he slipped, sliding on his back in a shower of loose rocks. As he struggled to his feet, reason came back to him, and a rush of fear, but it was too late. He looked up into a pair of angry Ashmodi eyes.

Other men came, all thin-legged elders. They growled, a low rumble deep in their throats.

Caleb crouched before them, frozen. They would think he was spying, of course. He would be ostracized. He and his family. Perhaps all softskins, forever.

Now, for sure, he had no other choice. He began to tear frantically at his clothes, stripping himself naked. "I . . . I . . . the sandwalk," he croaked. "I want to join the sandwalk."

The men's crests rippled. After a long silence, one of them touched Caleb's stomach. "You have not taken food?"

Caleb shook his head and held up four fingers.

The men stood again in silent thought while their eye colors changed to shades of yellow and green. "He has not been taught," said one.

""But it is not forbidden," said another.

After more deliberation, the eyes of all the elders became dully opaque.

"So. We are agreed."

Caleb thought he recognized the speaker as Tyset's first grandfather. The old one touched him lightly, reassuringly, on the shoulder. "Let us make him ready."

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The men formed a ring around Caleb, and from somewhere came the soft beat of a drum. Hands propelled him around in the circle of the sun, stopping him at each of the four directions. Someone dabbed something wet upon his forehead, the back of his head, and each of his shoulders, then led him to the end of the line of boys.

Tyset, when Caleb passed him, gave no sign of recognition. Like the other boys, he stared straight ahead, glassy-eyed.

The chanting resumed. The Ashmodi words sounded slurred to Caleb, or perhaps it was the weakness returning. He could barely stand, and concentrated all his attention on holding himself as straight as possible. The sun burned down upon his head, and the figures in front of him blurred.

Someone pressed a flask of chotay into his hands.

It will give you strength. Caleb couldn't tell if he heard the words or imagined them. He had not intended to take chotay — his plan was to remain clearheaded — but he knew that he couldn't walk even half a kilometer, let alone be of any help to Tyset, in his present condition.

He took the tiniest sip, gasping as the fiery liquid burned its way down his throat. After the first shock, he felt immeasurably better. He *was* stronger, and he could see clearly again.

Time had passed. How long, he couldn't tell, except that the line in front of him now contained only two boys. Tyset was gone.

Caleb shifted his feet impatiently. If Tyset got too far ahead.... Somehow he would have to catch up. When his turn came, he accepted a second sip of chotay.

You enter now the gateway between the worlds. This time, Caleb could understand the words of the chant perfectly. He moved off, walking tall.

The broad path was firm under his feet: hard-packed sand, hot and gritty. It was clearly marked as far as he could see, and he deliberately didn't look into the shimmering heat mists on either side.

He broke into a run, and before long passed the boy ahead of him. The trail narrowed, but still he could see no danger. He kept up the pace, pushing himself when he began to tire.

He ran for what he guessed must have been an hour. The blanket of heat hung on him, sapping his energy until his feet were almost too heavy to lift. Surely, he thought, he should have caught up by now with the next

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boy. He should even have caught up with Tyset. The trail, however, stretched ahead empty until it wound from sight.

Could it have branched, and he have missed it? He backtracked a ways, then stopped.

Standing still, the heat settled over Caleb until he could almost feel its texture. Sweat rolled off his body, but his mind was still clear. No, he decided, he couldn't possibly have strayed. But looking around, he saw that the topography had changed. The lake bed wasn't as flat as it had appeared from above. There were sizable peaks in the distance, rising above the heat mists. And the lines that he had thought were mere surface cracks, he saw now were several feet deep. In places they bisected the path, and he wondered how he could have missed seeing them when he was running. He shuddered; a misstep could have tripped him, sent him sprawling to the side of the trail, where, for the first time, he spotted patches of the bubbling sand.

At any rate, he couldn't afford to go backward any farther. Tyset and the other boys must be somewhere ahead. He started off again, but more slowly this time. Breathing was difficult, and his feet were heavier than ever.

Another swallow of chotay revived him, and he moved ahead as fast as he dared. He covered a second long stretch, and the mountains loomed closer. Still he met no one, and he tried not to think of the victims the quicksand might already have claimed. When he finally sighted Tyset, his relief flooded him.

Tyset swayed as he walked. Caleb could easily have caught up with him, but he deliberately hung back. Tyset wouldn't thank him if he interfered.

It was the part of his plan that he hadn't wanted to consider. *If only we could go together,* Tyset had said. But he had only wished the opportunity for his friend; he hadn't meant that he wanted assistance. That would be unthinkable for an Ashmodi on his sandwalk. It would be a disgrace.

No, Caleb thought, he would do nothing yet. Not until there was real danger. He matched his pace to Tyset's, keeping a good ten lengths behind. When Tyset stopped to drink chotay, Caleb dropped to the ground and flattened himself.

Tyset, however, did not look backward. He started off again at a half-run, but in minutes he was stumbling from one side of the path to the

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other. His body began to jerk — quick, spasmodic movements. Watching him, an image formed in Caleb's mind of a hop-gaited mountain ergip, darting from cover to cover.

In a flash of speed, the ergip was off the trail and scampering for the low brush that grew at the base of the nearest peak. "No!" Caleb screamed. The heat haze shimmered and lifted, and for a moment the brush and the mountains disappeared. Tyset, Caleb saw, was running directly toward a bubbling patch of quicksand.

Caleb leaped from the trail, too, but as he did so, the old dizziness came over him again. The ground went out from under him, and he fell backward into darkness.

He was falling, falling. Eventually, he knew, he would crash. He beat the air with his arms, flailing madly, until somehow he achieved a measure of control. His descent slowed, and as he leveled off into smooth flight, his arms became strong wings that bore him easily. He looked out through the eyes of a lorq as he swooped down from his mountain aerie, circling nearer and nearer to the glistening plain.

Caleb came to consciousness at the edge of the path, flat on his back and beating his arms against the ground. A tiny black speck circled above him, and to the side, not far off the trail, Tyset's body was already waist-deep in the sinking sand.

He looked directly at Caleb, but gave no sign. Neither did he struggle. His face was calm, with a faint smile.

Caleb heaved himself to his feet. He tried to move fast, but couldn't. Time stretched, and he was caught in a sticky web that prolonged every motion.

Now, he told himself. He had to act now, but his mind was behaving as strangely as his body. Always before, when he had imagined this moment, he had felt no hesitation. Whatever the Ashmodi beliefs, dead was dead, and Tyset *had* to be rescued.

Tyset continued to gaze at Caleb without recognition. He raised his arms, as if to something Caleb could not see, and the moment was frozen between Caleb's suspended heartbeats.

I'll only be free that much sooner, Tyset had said. What would his life be like if he were pulled back? Would he still emerge from the walk as a man?

They were traitorous thoughts, and Caleb forced them away. Of course

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he had to intervene! If only he could break out of his stasis. . . .

The lorq still circled overhead, the only movement in the otherwise frozen scene. How had it managed to stay free? Caleb concentrated all of his attention on it. *Help me*, he begged soundlessly.

Everything shifted around Caleb, even the sky. His paralysis continued, but he was suddenly high in the mountains. The lorq was almost directly overhead, huge and black, with eyes like faceted gems and taloned feet. It hung low for a moment, then swooped over a nearby marshy pond and plucked out a small, furry ergip that had been trapped in the ooze.

Released, the ergip hopped into a brushy shelter. With a rush of wings, the lorq, too, was gone.

Caleb's world shifted again. A wave of nausea left him shivering, for all the heat, and when it passed, he found himself standing once more on the flat, dry lake bed. The mountains were gone, the quicksand pool was empty, and a naked figure ran limping up the trail.

Tyset's body was covered from the waist down with drying dark sand, and his shoulders bore long, bloody scratches.

Caleb walked proudly, just behind Tyset, through the ranks of solemn, chanting Ashmodis. Bill and Elena waited at the end of the line, both of them wide-eyed and unnaturally pale.

"I can't believe it!" Elena gasped after assuring herself that Caleb was indeed unharmed. "How could you have . . . but what a coup!" She alternated between hugging him and shaking him. "You might have warned us!"

Caleb grinned. "If I had, would you have let me?"

"Of course not! When I think what might have happened. . . ." Her voice trembled.

Bill patted her shoulder. "At least he didn't fast, or take the drug. He wasn't in any real danger." He turned to Caleb. "Isn't that right?"

"Yes," Caleb said. "No real danger."

"Then what *did* go on?" Elena held out her palm with its tiny recorder.

Caleb shrugged. "I don't know what the others went through. For me, it was just a long, hot walk."

"We want all the details," Bill said. "But not here. Not in front of them." He took Caleb's arm. "Let's get home right away."

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"In a minute." Caleb felt sorry for them both, that they would hear so little. Perhaps someday, he thought, another Laurent would publish a new chapter to Elena's thesis. When he knew himself what he had experienced.

Now, though, he had to see Tyset.

"Over here. Come." Tyset waved from within a circle of his admiring family.

"Come share our feast," he said, pulling Caleb in. His eyes were a brilliant joy-blue as he squeezed Caleb's hands and whispered, "My great flying brother."

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Bradley Denton's last story here was "Jimmy Blackburn Flies A Kite," (October 1990). Here is another powerful and distinctive tale from Mr. Denton, a ghost story about violence, vigilantism and revenge.

Skidmore

By Bradley Denton

FOR A LONG time, I wanted to kill a certain man of my acquaintance. He was the sort of man who professed peace, love, and liberal viewpoints, but treated people like shit. If my conscience had been that of an infant, I could have blown him away and suffered not a hour of guilt.

And I wouldn't be caught. I've never owned weapons, but it's an easy thing to steal a firearm and replace it without detection. I'm a good shot, too, but few know it. Certainly no one would suspect me. This is because I have the reputation of being a good boy. And so, by upbringing and training, I am.

But upbringing and training can be overcome.

Let me tell you about Skidmore.

Skidmore, Missouri. Population 447.

In Nodaway County, in the northwestern corner of the state. Farm country.

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On Friday July 10, 1981, a forty-seven-year-old coon-dog breeder named Ken Rex McElroy climbed into his pickup truck in front of the D & G Tavern in Skidmore, on Missouri Highway 113. His wife, half his age, sat beside him.

More than thirty people, the moral heart of the community, stood nearby. They had all been part of a meeting at the American Legion hall that morning. The topic had been What to Do About McElroy.

McElroy, five-foot eight, 260 pounds.

McElroy, said to have cut off one of his wife's breasts.

McElroy, thief, arsonist, and rapist.

McElroy, convicted of second-degree assault for shooting the grocer.

McElroy, free on bond, with twenty-five days to file a motion for a new trial.

But the new trial had been held.

As McElroy sat in his pickup, a .30-30 steel-jacketed bullet shattered the rear window and caught him under his right ear. Then a .22 magnum slug took off the back of his skull. More bullets followed, but they weren't needed. Somebody pulled McElroy's wife from the truck and took her into the bank. She was unhurt. Outside, the truck's engine raced. McElroy's foot was jammed down on the accelerator.

No killer was ever named. No one was arrested.

Justice.

I thought about Skidmore every day for the next six years, drawn there by an urge that was like an instinct. The parallel between McElroy and the man I wanted to kill was inescapable. Their methods of abuse differed, but they were of the same mold and spirit.

Nevertheless, when discussing McElroy's execution, as everyone in my part of the country did for a while, I expressed the horror of vigilantism that I believed was proper. This was a result of my upbringing and training.

I had always been a good boy.

Let me tell you what that means.

I have never been in a fight. As a child, I was often beaten up, but that isn't the same thing. It is, in fact, the furthest thing from it. I took the blows, believing what my parents and church had taught me. When my lips bled and eyes swelled, I told myself that I would, as Jesus might say, inherit the earth.

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I also told myself that I would behave no differently if I were stocky and tough instead of skinny and weak. My size had nothing to do with my values. Violence was wrong. Violence solved nothing. I knew this because I watched the TV news. I grew up during the war that was scored by body counts. I swore that I would never strike another person.

For several months during grade school, an older kid pounded me and my brother after we got off the bus to walk home. He threw us down in the ditch, then kicked us. Running did no good; he was fast. Fighting back did no good; he was stronger. Once, I gave in to my brother's insistence that we defend ourselves, and this taught me the price of betraying my convictions. We were beaten and trampled as we had never been beaten and trampled before.

Some weeks later, a friend invited me to spend a Friday night at his house. My parents said it was all right, and, for the first time, I didn't get on the bus after school. I sent my brother off alone.

My friend lived near school, so we walked. On the way, we encountered a kid who didn't care for my friend. He shoved my friend; my friend shoved back. The kid then knocked my friend to the ground and punched him until blood ran from his nose. Then he punched him some more.

I stood by.

I was a good boy.

On the morning of Friday July 10, 1987, I kissed my wife good-bye and watched her drive away down the gravel road. We were living in a crumbling farmhouse in the hills south of a Kansas college town, and she had to make the long trip in every day. I worried about her.

She worried about me, too. Things had not happened for me the way they had been supposed to, and this had made me bitter. Worse, I had been lied to, used, and ridiculed. The man I wanted to kill had been instrumental in these events.

My back ached. I slept little, and awoke scowling. I shouted at my wife. I refused to speak to friends when they telephoned. Worst of all, I couldn't work. In my profession, being unable to work is the same as being dead.

And so it was that as the profitless days stretched to weeks, my desire to kill that man of my acquaintance intensified. At the same time, my other instinct urged me toward Skidmore with increasing insistence.

On July 10, as I watched my wife drive away, I knew that I could

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resist no longer. I would have to answer one call or the other before the day was out. After a few minutes of indecision, I made the choice that I believed would be the easier to reconcile with my upbringing and training. I made sure that my dog had food and water, and then I climbed onto my motorcycle and left. The dog chased me down the road, and I had to stop and yell at him. He slunk back to the yard.

The trip would be 150 miles, give or take ten. I had checked the atlas and memorized the roads. The day was hot and bright.

I took the most direct route: North on U.S. 59, then northeast across the Missouri River into St. Joe. North again on U.S. 71 to Maryville. West eleven miles on Missouri 46.

South four miles on 113.

Skidmore.

It was a few minutes before noon. The trip had taken four hours. My back hurt worse than ever, and I was hungry.

Skidmore: two service stations, a grain elevator, church, post office, bank, café, and tavern. A few parked pickup trucks. Peeled paint and a rusty stop sign. No human being in sight.

The instinct that had brought me there was gone. Skidmore had been revealed as nothing more than a Podunk town after the pattern of all the other Podunk towns I had ridden through on the way. If anything, it was even less alive. It was worn down, decayed. Silent. The only thing Skidmore had to distinguish it was the killing of McElroy, and that had happened six years ago.

I ate a greasy cheeseburger at the café. The air-conditioning was weak, and my hair stayed sweaty. When the burger was gone, I nursed a Coke until my back felt better. A couple of stoop-shouldered farmers came in, and one asked if that was my bike out front. I said it was, and he said it looked sharp. Then they sat down across the room and ignored me. I left three quarters on the table, used the rest room, and went out. The waitress nodded. Her mouth was a dry pink line. She looked a hundred years old.

What had I expected?

I put on my helmet, got on the bike, and headed south. I would take a less direct way home, cutting west through the southeastern corner of Nebraska. Unfamiliar territory. I hoped it would be distracting. Since the urge that had brought me to Skidmore was gone, there was only one thing I wanted to do.

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I was less than a mile out of town, when the motorcycle died. I let it roll to a stop on the dirt shoulder of 113 before realizing that it was out of gas. I glanced down and switched the fuel valve to the reserve so I could return to Skidmore and fill the tank. As I looked up again, I glimpsed something to my right. I turned to see it.

In the ditch, Ken Rex McElroy was waiting.

A ragged, gaping hole took up most of the left side of his face. He climbed up from the ditch, and I saw that the back of his skull was gone.

"Welcome," he said.

Some of his teeth had been shot away. He was bloody.

"Welcome to Skidmore."

McELROY WAS big. Redneck big. His tattooed arms were like tree trunks.

I knew men like this. I had grown up with men like this. Men like this had beaten me for practice when they were kids. He stood on the highway shoulder, staring at me with his dead eyes, and I was afraid of him. But even more, I hated him. I hated him as much as the man I wanted to kill.

"Get away from me," I said.

McElroy didn't move. "Ready to go?" he asked. His voice was flat. Stark.

I knew then that he wouldn't leave. "I have to get gas," I said.

He returned to the ditch. "I'll wait."

I was shaking, but I managed to start the bike and ride back to Skidmore. I bought gas from an old man who wanted to talk. The weather, the crops, the goddamned politicians and courts, all in a dull monotone. I left as soon as I had my change.

I would go home the way I had come. I would ride fast.

Just north of the Skidmore city limits, a right turn took 113 between two soybean fields. As I came out of the turn, I saw McElroy standing in the road ahead.

I stopped. McElroy waited. After a while I let the bike idle up to him. He got on behind me.

The ride home was hard. McElroy was heavy, and I wasn't used to riding with extra weight. Once, I lost control on a curve, and the bike veered into the left lane in front of a semi. I went off onto the shoulder, and the semi rushed past, blaring.

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I was still more than seventy miles from home. I didn't think I would make it.

Then the mirror showed me a flash of silver in McElroy's eyes, and I didn't think I wanted to.

Let me tell you about a flash of silver.

One day during my eleventh summer, my grandfather, my father, my uncle, three of my male cousins, and my brother and I went tramping in my grandfather's pasture. The day was hot and bright. The adults had beer. Once in a while we kids were given a sip. My uncle carried a new .30-06 bolt-action rifle with a scope. It was a heavy weapon with a kick.

We gathered on one side of a pond that was maybe seventy yards across. On the far side, near the top of the dam, my uncle had placed a flattened beer can. It shone like a mirror. If I looked straight at it, my eyes hurt.

The others took shots at the can, and the dust that flew up showed where the bullets struck. The men each shot within two feet of the target. My cousins and brother did less well. No one hit it. I hung back, hoping they would forget to give me a turn. I had a terror of guns.

When everyone but I had fired, they started to walk around the pond. I hurried to join them, and my uncle saw me. He made them all stop, then handed me the rifle and grinned. The men and boys shaded their eyes and gazed across the water.

The weapon was even heavier than I had imagined. The barrel wavered as I brought the stock to my shoulder. My arms were white twigs.

But when the rifle was in place and I was squinting through the scope, everything felt different.

I let out my breath. The stock was smooth and warm against my cheek. The trigger nestled within my curled finger. My vision was sharp. I had become a thing of metal and wood, of crystalline sight. A thing of power.

The stock crunched against my shoulder. A crack of thunder numbed my ear. My power was gone, and I strained to see.

There was no puff of dust. I had fired over the dam.

"Pretty big gun for a little guy," my grandfather said. My father said nothing. I handed the rifle back to my uncle, and he winked at me. It was a consolation wink.

We walked around the pond and started across the dam. Then my

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uncle stopped above the beer can, and we all stared at it. A round hole had been punched through the middle. My uncle winked at me again.

One of my cousins said that it must have been his shot. But his bullet had sprayed dust, as had everyone's but mine. He had to know, as my uncle knew, that it was the runt, the white-armed bookworm, who had hit the target. Dead center.

My uncle gave me the can, and we headed back toward the house. I felt proud. I put my thumb through the hole. Then I felt sick, and I dropped the can in the dirt.

As I had put my thumb through the hole, the beer can had changed. It had become the face of a kid who had taunted me throughout the preceding school year. It had become the face that had called me "Muskrat."

It had become the face that I had seen through the rifle scope, in the flash of silver across the pond.

It was after five when I made it back from Skidmore. McElroy was with me. My wife would be home soon.

My dog came running at the sound of the motorcycle, then saw McElroy and stopped. The hair on his back rose, and he growled.

McElroy stood in the driveway. "I liked dogs," he said.

I took off my helmet. "Well, this dog doesn't like you."

McElroy looked at me then, and I was scared.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said. "I don't get mad now. I don't feel nothing. I don't need nothing."

Hate suppressed fear. "Then why did you want to come here?"

"You're the one wants something."

McElroy walked toward the house. He moved stiffly. Wet stains smeared his brown shirt and pants. His suede cowboy boots were speckled with dark spots.

"What in hell would I want from a corpse?" I yelled. My voice echoed from the barn.

He stopped on the porch. Something dripped from his face and spattered on the concrete.

I could hear my wife's car coming up the road, so I went around McElroy and unlocked the door. He went inside.

I put him in the basement. It was mud-floored, dank, and cluttered with piles of junk that a previous tenant, long since deceased, had left

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there years ago. These were infested with mice. I had also seen a five-foot blacksnake down there once. I doubted that McElroy would mind.

He stayed in the basement whenever my wife was home. If we needed frozen food brought up, I made sure I was the one to go down and get it. He always stood in the corner beside the freezer. Spiders built webs on him. He didn't speak unless I did.

In August I went to a week-long conference on the West Coast. I knew that I should skip it, but I had bought my plane ticket before McElroy came home with me, and it was nonrefundable. So I talked my wife into staying with a friend in town, and I asked a neighbor to stop by and feed my dog. My wife would have known something was wrong if I'd spent money on a kennel. The poor dog would be scared the whole time, but McElroy wouldn't hurt him. I didn't think.

As it turned out, McElroy came with me.

I didn't know it until the plane was in the air. There had been two empty seats beside me, but when I returned from a trip to the lavatory, McElroy was in one of them. I had to squeeze past, sucking in my breath so as not to touch him. His wounds never dried.

I sat down. "Go back," I said. "People will be watching me this week."

McElroy gave me his stare. "You want me here."

A flight attendant came by and asked if I would like something to drink. She didn't ask McElroy. Her eyes avoided him. Blood smeared her sleeve when she reached across him to hand me a beer, and she didn't even notice.

A few days into the conference, I discovered that one of the attendees was very much like the man I wanted to kill. He was a master of ridicule, and he made it clear that he didn't consider me worthy of anything but contempt. During his most scathing comments, I had to suppress a laugh. What would he consider me worthy of, I wondered, if he knew what waited in my room?

I thought then of what McElroy had done to the people of Skidmore, and of how they had reached a point beyond which they could take no more. I wondered how much I would be able to take before I reached that same point.

More, I believed. Much more. My upbringing and training had steeled me. I accepted my colleague's contempt and gave back a smile. I had

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higher limits than he could reach.

I was, after all, a good boy.

LET ME tell you what that doesn't mean.

I've already said that I've never been in a fight, and that's true. But that doesn't mean I've never hurt anyone.

After the day that I saw a classmate's face as a rifle target, I had an even greater terror of guns than before. I knew now what they could do to me. What I didn't know was that a gun wasn't the only weapon that could do it. I didn't learn better until my nineteenth summer.

I had graduated from high school and was working for wheat cutters to earn money for college. One of my duties was to drive truckloads of grain to an enormous elevator on the east side of Wichita. This is what I was doing when I committed my first true act of violence.

The day was hot and bright. I had been working hard, and my shirt was stuck to my back with sweat and dirt. Grain dust grated under my eyelids. The truck cab was hot enough to bake biscuits. A single narrow alley led to the elevator's scales, and it was marked ONE WAY.

I drove to the scales, transacted my business, and helped the elevator employees auger the grain from the truck bed. My swollen eyes itched, and my chest heaved from inhaling dust. As soon as the truck was empty, I jumped into the cab and continued down the alley. When I was thirty yards short of the street, a loaded truck turned in. In front of me. Going the wrong way.

I hit the brakes and blared the horn. The other truck slammed to a halt and spilled part of its load. The red-faced driver leaned from his window. "Get out of the way, asshole!" he yelled.

And I could have. I could have put the truck into reverse and backed up an eighth of a mile to the entrance. I could have let him come in the wrong way. I was supposed to be a good boy.

But I was tired and hurting, and I forgot. I yelled back at him, using the same word he had used against me. I added that he was going the wrong goddamn way.

I had never done anything like that before.

He yelled something again, but I didn't hear what it was. I was revving my truck's engine. I popped the clutch and lurched forward.

He backed out fast. Even so, I nicked the corner of his bumper. My

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truck rumbled onto the street at ten miles an hour, and the other guy jumped from his truck and ran after me. I saw him coming in my side mirror.

I couldn't believe it. He had left a loaded truck on the street to chase me on foot. He was screaming obscenities, demanding that I stop and let him kick the shit out of me. I leaned out the window and told him to go fuck himself. Another first. I was almost as mad as he was.

But I wasn't as stupid.

He was running behind the left rear wheel of my truck. His face was at the level of the bed. The bed was metal-edged hardwood. I sped up a little, and he kept coming. I let him gain on me until he was about four feet from the tail of the bed.

He screamed, "Stop, you little cocksucker!"

So I stopped. Hard. I heard the *whunk*.

I waited a few seconds, then shut off the engine. The street was quiet.

I got out and went to the rear of the truck. The guy was lying on the pavement with his hands over his face. He rocked from side to side. When he heard my boots scuff beside him, he uncovered his face. It seemed to swell as I watched. There was only a little blood, but it was from both nose and mouth. I saw the result of rage.

"Muffa*fucchhah*," he said. He had bitten his tongue.

I pointed at the alley. "The entrance," I said, "is at the other end."

I got back into the truck and left. In the mirror I saw the guy stand and stagger back toward his load. I felt better than I had all day. At the first red light, I adjusted the mirror so I could see myself laugh. My face looked familiar, but not like me.

That night I dreamed that I was the one running after the truck, that I was the one struck down. After I fell, the truck backed over me. I awoke clutching the sheet, choking. I stumbled to the bathroom and retched up phlegm and grain dust. When I was finished, I avoided looking at the medicine-cabinet mirror. I swore that I would never again retaliate against one who had attacked me.

I still have that dream. Sometimes, after I've been run over, it's as if I'm looking down at my own dead face.

Ever since going to Skidmore, I look like McElroy.

On Thursday July 7, 1988, my wife came home crying. Hours passed

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before she would say what was wrong. As I held her, waiting for the words to come, I heard thumps from the basement. McElroy was doing something, but I couldn't go down to find out what. My wife needed me.

At last she told me what had happened. It involved the man I wanted to kill. His words and actions had been cruel and insidious. He was always careful to camouflage his behavior to everyone except his victims. I knew. I had been one of those victims. But while I had sworn to endure attacks upon myself, I had not sworn to endure any upon the one person I loved. I didn't tell my wife, but at the moment she revealed what he had done, I knew that I would finally do it.

After my wife had fallen asleep, I went down to the basement. My fear and hatred of McElroy was still strong, but I had to tell him what I was going to do. Who better to consult about death than one already dead?

McElroy stood in his usual corner, shadowed. The basement's single bulb wasn't bright enough. I could see his eyes and part of his ruined face, but the rest was hidden. Hideous as he was, I preferred seeing his entire form, as I had in the sunshine outside Skidmore.

I stopped under the bulb. "I understand now why those people had to kill you," I said. "And I think I know why you said I wanted something. Since you came here, I've become less afraid of death. So now I can use it against someone who deserves it. What do you think of that?"

McElroy stepped into the light. A long, plastic-wrapped bundle was cradled in his arms. He held it out to me. I took it, careful not to touch him. The plastic, speckled with mouse droppings, was secured with duct tape.

I set the bundle on the floor to unwrap it. Beneath the plastic was a layer of canvas, and beneath that was a zippered leather case. Inside, I found a .30-06 bolt-action rifle with a scope. It was in perfect condition. Someone had cleaned and oiled it before wrapping it up. A box of cartridges nestled in a pocket of the case.

McElroy pointed toward a pile of junk against the wall. "I found it under there."

That pile had been undisturbed for years, and I was certain that neither my landlord nor any other living soul knew the rifle had been there. I could use the weapon the one time I would need it, rewrap it, and replace it under the pile. Unless I was caught in the act of pulling the trigger, many more years would pass before anyone else even knew of its existence.

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I sighted down the rifle and checked its action. The sensation was just as it had been on that day at my grandfather's pond. I would hit my target on the first shot.

"This," I said to McElroy, "is what I wanted from you." I held up the gun. *"This."*

It would happen tomorrow. I would have to ride my motorcycle, but transporting the weapon wouldn't be a problem. McElroy would carry it.

I knew he would be joining me.

WE LEFT for town at 11:00 A.M. on Friday July 8. The day was hot and bright. My dog didn't follow us. McElroy rode behind me, holding the rifle across his chest. No one would see it because no one would see him.

Earlier, after my wife had driven away, I had tested the rifle behind the barn. I had shot at a sheet of typing paper fixed to a bale of hay. From seventy yards I had hit dead center. From eighty I had blown off a corner. Close enough.

As the bike accelerated, I shuddered with the knowledge that I was about to do something wonderful. The man I wanted to kill had crushed my upbringing and training to scar tissue. I had entered a higher plane of morality. This act would be easier than hitting the brakes on the truck had been, and would do more good. Even knowing that McElroy sat behind me gave me no qualms. Death was nothing to me now but a tool to be used to improve existence. I had to struggle to keep my speed below sixty.

In town I left the motorcycle on a side street and walked to the college. McElroy followed with the rifle. Several people passed us on the sidewalk when we reached campus, but none acknowledged me or noticed McElroy. We proceeded to the grove of maples below the campanile. A few students were picnicking, but they didn't look up. We entered a clump of bushes beside the street, and I crouched. McElroy did likewise. A bicyclist went by without giving us a glance. We were hidden.

The man I wanted to kill had his office on the third floor of the building across the street. He ate his lunch there, alone, every day. His desk and chair were beside the window, which was open. He wasn't there yet, but I knew he would be soon. I took the rifle from McElroy, then settled onto my knees and peered through the scope. I estimated the range to be about seventy-five yards. The gun barrel protruded only a few inches

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from the bushes. I loaded the rifle and then laid it across my thighs to wait.

The dirt under the bushes was damp, but I'd expected that. I would launder my jeans as soon as I got home, and I was wearing old sneakers that I would burn. Hate doesn't make one stupid. Rage does, but I had been careful to avoid rage. I checked my watch. It was three minutes to noon. I looked at McElroy. He stared back.

Up in his office, the man I wanted to kill sat down and opened his briefcase. I had a clear view of both chest and head.

He unwrapped a sandwich and started to eat. I wondered if they would find some of it still in his mouth. I brought up the rifle. The stock was smooth and warm against my cheek. The barrel quivered, and then was steady. In the scope the man smiled as he chewed. He was reading something. Probably a story of pain or humiliation. The spiderweb-thin cross hairs intersected below his left eye.

The campanile chimed to announce the hour. I flinched at the sound, and the rifle twitched. I brought it back true and waited for the big bell to begin tolling. I would remain still through the first two knells to get the rhythm. On the third I would fire, blending the noise of my shot with the rumble that filled the grove.

The ground vibrated with the first deep tone, and my teeth hummed. I let out my breath. At the second tone, the man above laughed.

My finger tightened.

At the third tone, the man I wanted to kill became a bleeding wound. The rifle stock hit my cheekbone. I dropped the weapon and sat on my heels.

Before me stood McElroy, a new hole bubbling under his throat.

"Take me back," he said.

The bell tolled a fourth time, and a fifth. Blood crept down the front of McElroy's shirt like syrup.

I lunged sideways to see around him, branches scratching my face. In his office the man I wanted to kill was still chewing and chuckling. My bullet had stayed inside McElroy. I picked up the rifle and reloaded, then saw that the barrel was clogged with dirt. I tried to clean it out with my shirttail. The bell tolled a sixth time, and a seventh.

On the eighth I raised the rifle and sighted. Again McElroy stepped into the way. I shouted, asking him why. My voice was swallowed by the ninth toll.

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"You don't want me here anymore," McElroy said.

At the tenth knell, I scrambled around him, crashing through the bushes, and aimed my weapon. At the eleventh the cross hairs centered on my target's grinning mouth. I saw a flash of silver.

The twelfth knell sounded.

The man I wanted to kill went on eating. I lowered the rifle and looked back at McElroy.

"Home?" I asked.

He stared down at me.

"Skidmore," he said.

It wasn't the town we had left the year before.

The buildings had been painted. The windows gleamed. Old men in denim overalls sat outside the gas stations and chewed tobacco. Women in polyester pants gathered in front of the grocery store while their toddlers sucked on Popsicles. A banner announcing a community barbecue hung over the entrance to the American Legion hall. Children rode bicycles up and down the side streets. A young farmer sauntered into the tavern, whistling.

I parked the motorcycle in front of the café and killed the engine. McElroy and I got off.

Silence.

I pulled off my helmet and looked around. The old men were staring down the street at us. The women stared, too, then gathered up their babies and hurried away. The barbecue banner came loose in a gust of wind and blew onto Missouri 113. A child stopped his bicycle, let it fall, and ran. The door to the tavern opened, and the farmer peered out, his lips still pursed.

McElroy handed me the rifle, then walked to the center of the street. The banner tumbled past him. He stopped and raised his hands as if in benediction.

People began disappearing into buildings.

McElroy stood there until I was the only one left outside. Then he continued down the street, his hands still raised. He left a red trail on the asphalt.

The café door opened, and the waitress ran out and grasped my arm.

"Please," she said. Her eyes begged. "Don't leave him here."

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McElroy turned a corner and vanished. His blood remained.

I looked at the waitress. "I'm sorry," I said.

I leaned the rifle against the wall beside the café door, then went inside with the waitress and bought another cheeseburger. It was all I could do. Afterward I rode up the street and filled the bike's tank at the same station as before. This time the old man didn't want to talk. He just gazed off down the highway.

I called my wife from the pay phone there, catching her before she left work, and told her I'd be home late. Then I got on the bike and headed south. When I passed the café, I saw my rifle leaning against the wall. I slowed, then went on past.

South of Skidmore the ditches were empty. I left the dead town behind.

The man I wanted to kill is still alive, though my upbringing and training have nothing to do with it. Someone will kill him someday . . . but it won't be me.

Let me tell you why.

I won't live with a hated man forever, as the people of that small Missouri town must live with Ken Rex McElroy. A year was enough. I've seen the price of justice, and it's a higher price than I can pay.

So I've again sworn that I will, as Jesus might say, inherit the earth. It isn't an easy vow to keep. After all, there are always those who treat people like shit, and there are always weapons available. But whenever I find myself filled with hate, I repeat these words:

"Welcome.

"Welcome to Skidmore."

As a result, I have not killed anyone.

Yet.

Which is the most, I think, that any good boy can say.

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Terry Bisson is the author of four novels: WYRLDMAKER (Pocket 1981), TALKING MAN (Arbor House, 1987), FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN (Morrow 1988), and VOYAGE TO THE RED PLANET (Morrow 1990). A native of Kentucky and a graduate of the University of Louisville, he lives in New York City. His first F&SF story sort of sneaks up on you, a wonderful deadpan tall tale.

The Coon Suit

By Terry Bisson

I'M NOT MUCH of a hunter and I don't care for dogs. I was driving out Taylorsville Road in Oldham County one Sunday, when I saw this bunch of pickups down in a hollow by a pond. My own yellow-and-white '77 Ford half-ton was bought from a coon hunter, and it could have been the truck as much as me that slowed down to take a look. Men were standing around the pickups, most of which had dog boxes in the beds. I saw a xeroxed sign stapled to a telephone pole, and realized I had been seeing the same sign for a couple of miles along the road.

COON RUN, SUNDAY, CARPENTERS LAKE.

If this was Carpenters Lake, it was not much more than a pond. I could hear dogs barking. I pulled over to watch.

There was a cable running across the water. It ran from a pole where the trucks were parked, into the trees on the other side of the pond. Hanging under it, like a cable car, was a wire cage. While I watched, two men took six or eight hounds out of the back of a half-ton Ford and

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down to the bank. The dogs were going wild and I could see why.

There was a coon in the cage. From where I was parked, up on the road, it was just a little black shape. It looked like a skunk or a big house cat. It was probably just my imagination, but I thought I could see the black eyes, panicky under the white mask, and the handlike feet plucking at the wire mesh.

A rope ran from the cage, through a pulley on a tree at the far end of the cable, and back. A man pulled at the rope, and the cage started across the cable, only three or four feet off the water. The men on the bank let the dogs go, and they threw themselves in the pond. They were barking louder than ever, swimming under the cage as it was pulled in long, slow jerks toward the woods on the other side.

My wife Katie tells me I'm a watcher, and it's true I'd generally rather watch than do. I wasn't even tempted to join the men by the pond, even though I probably knew one or two of them from the plant. I had a better view from up on the road. There was something fascinating and terrifying at the same time about the dogs splashing clumsily through the water (they don't call it dog-paddling for nothing), looking up hungrily at the dark shape in the wire cage.

Once the cage was moving, the coon sat dead still. He probably figured he had the situation under control. I could almost see the smirk on his face as he looked down at the dogs in the water, a sort of aviator look.

On the bank, the men leaned against their trucks, drinking beer and watching. They all wore versions of the same hat, drove versions of the same truck, and looked like versions of the same guy. Not that I think I'm better than them; I'm just not much of a hunter and don't care for dogs. From the boxes in the truck beds, the other hounds waiting their turn set up a howl, a background harmony to the wild barking from the pond.

The situation wasn't fair, though, because whenever the dogs fell behind, the man pulling the rope would stop pulling and let them catch up. While the cage was moving, the coon was O.K.; but as soon as it stopped, he would go crazy. He would jump from side to side, trying to get it going again, while the hounds paddled closer and closer. Dogs when they're swimming are all jaws. Then the man would pull on the rope, and the cage would take off again toward the trees on the other side, and I could almost see the coon get that smirk on his face again. That aviator look.

The second act of the drama began when the cage reached the tree

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at the end of the cable. The tree tripped the door, and the coon dove out and hit the ground. In a flash he was gone, into the woods that ran up over the hill alongside the road. A few seconds later, and the dogs were out of the water after him, the whole pack running like a yellow blur up the bank, shaking themselves as they ran, the water rising off their backs like a cloud of steam. Then they were gone into the trees, too.

One of the pickups was already on its way up the road, presumably to follow. The guys in it looked at me kind of funny as they drove by, but I ignored them. Down by the pond, the cage was being pulled back, six more dogs were being taken out of the trucks, and a man held a squirming gunnysack at arms' length.

Another coon.

They put him into the cage, and I should have left, since I was expected somewhere. But there was something interesting — or I guess fascinating is the word — about the whole business, and I had to see more. I drove a hundred yards up the road and stopped by the edge of the woods.

I got out of the truck.

The brush by the roadside was thick, but after I got into the woods, things opened up a little. It was mostly oak, gum, and hickory. I made my way down the slope toward the pond, walking quietly so I could listen. I could tell by the barking when the dogs hit the water. I could tell when the cage stopped, and when it started up again. It was in the dogs' voices. Through them, I could almost feel the coon's terror when the cage stopped, and his foolish annoyance when it started moving again.

Halfway down the hill, I stopped in a little clearing at the foot of a big, hollow beech. All around me were thick bushes, tangles of fallen limbs, and brush. The barking got louder and wilder, and I knew the cage was reaching the cable's end. There was a howl of rage, and I knew the coon was in the woods. I stood perfectly still. Soon I heard a sharp slithering sound, and, without a warning, without stirring a leaf, the coon ran out of the bushes and straight at me. I was too startled to move. He ran almost right across my feet — a black-and-white blur — and was gone up the hill, into the bushes again. For a second I almost felt sorry for the dogs: how could they ever hope to catch such a creature?

Then I heard the dogs again. Pitiless is the word for them. If they had looked all jaws in the water, they sounded all claws and slobber in the woods. Their barking got louder and wilder as they got closer, at least

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six of them, hot on the coon's trail. Then I heard a crashing in the brush down the hill. Then I saw the bushes shaking, like a storm coming up low to the ground. Then I heard the rattle of claws on dry leaves, getting closer and closer. Then I saw a yellow blur as the dogs bolted from the bushes and across the clearing straight at me. I stepped back in horror.

That's when I realized — or I guess remembered is the word — that I had my coon suit on.

"If you ask me, I think it's the greenhouse effect."

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J. Marc Matz is a 40-year-old Los Angeles small businessman and part-time writer who offers a short and mordant extrapolation about the business of selling guns. The paperwork is really ridiculous . . .

At Cost

By Marc Matz

"I WANNA BUY a gun."

I had to lean over the display case — no easy thing for an old *barrigón* like me — to see the client. I figured him to be about eight years old, a short eight. He was wearing a World Cup T-shirt; the way he was twitching, it looked as if the Club Santos team colors were banging the hell out of All-England's — which, come to think of it, is exactly what Santos had done to the Brits: 6 to zip.

I really didn't like the way he shook, but at least he didn't have the usual cold, blank eyes, and the door wouldn't have let him in if he weren't clean. Well, I live by the oldest equation:

"No money, no action," I said.

He fished his card out of a hip pocket, thumbed it active, and handed it over.

Geotronics. He worked for a good company. Honest wages, half hour of Basic Ed. on company time, and one of the fairest corporate Waiver of Responsibility contracts around town. From the thickness of his wrists,

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and the little flecks of white scar tissue on his forearms, the kid probably was a node scraper. I shuddered slightly at the thought — I've always had a touch of claustrophobia. Sighing, I turned back to the system and put LIFEBOAT on background. "O.K., hold on while I check it."

I ran the card through the ACC. It was only a few seconds before I got the obnoxious Gao Kim Bank logo and

William J. Breeden
5/12/27

— So he's nine. —
C.B.: .43 troy oz. AU

I had forgotten that Geotronics was a hard-currency company. I grunted unhappily — I'm a "Cross of Gold" man myself. But business is business. All right, so what was the London fix? F$1,191.2, down 10.72 from yesterday's Bangkok close. Damn, I thought. The Mare Crisium gold fields must be coming on-line faster than expected. If that keeps up, the Transvaalers and Novy Kronstadt are going to get tactical with each other. Hmm, I wonder what the book would be on that action. . . . Later. O.K., William J. Breeden had enough money to buy anything short of an HK-91, and somehow I didn't think he was planning on getting into a firefight with GTI's militia.

I switched back to LIFEBOAT and, using the cheater routine Buddy Donovan sold me, saved the goddamn game. Screw real time — I wasn't going to give it up now. I've never before reached the final four at the Donner level.

"O.K., Citizen Breeden — or can I call you Billy?" I gave him my best confidence-building smile. Maybe he'd stop twitching. He jerked his head, and I broadened my grin. "First I'm going to have to get a Statement of Intent from you before you can start shopping. I'm sorry, but the goddamngovment still requires it for sales to twelve and unders. You'd think that after the Great Repeal, they would have gotten rid of that bullshit, too, but no. . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders real fast, so I cut the politics. I didn't want him to get cold feet — my own account could use a boost, even if it was with gold.

"Anyway, I've got to ask your purpose for buying a weapon."

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While I was talking to him, I called up the standard form and started typing in the usual bullshit.

There was a long pause before I heard him say, just barely above a whisper, "I gotta kill my dad."

"*Hijo de la chingada!*" I rattled off. One glance at the expression on his face, and I quickly backspaced — hitting the keys so hard my nails hurt —over "Defense & Entertainment" and replaced it with "Personal Justice." The screen flashed yellow, and the detail window popped up.

I took a deep breath and asked, "Why?"

The kid's lips were trembling badly. "He won't stop touching Sally."

"Your sister?" I guessed.

"Yeah."

"I see. *Bad* touching?"

". . . Yeah."

I didn't bother to ask him if he was sure. "How old's Sally?"

"Six — next month."

It was my turn for a long pause. "Why doesn't your mother or your family take care of the problem?"

He shrugged his thin shoulders again. "All we've got is Uncle Ted, and he took off a coupla years ago. I don't know where he is."

He didn't say anything more.

"Your mother dead?"

"No." He was staring at the floor with his chin tucked so far in that I had to ask him to repeat what he had said.

It came out of him hard: "She doesn't wanna listen."

La vale madre puta! No, worse than a useless whore. Like an old grandmother with her beads, I rubbed the clica tattoo on the web between my thumb and forefinger. Poor bastard: no help, not enough money to hire a private judge, and the charity — 'scuse me, the Government — courts have a three-year waiting list. Shit, you think what with the mortality rate of freaks nowadays, this kind of crap wouldn't come up. But they're like goddamn roaches — no matter how much you blast away, they keep coming back. Craftier and nastier.

"Billy, what's your father's name and address?"

"My daddy's — his name is John Breeden. We live at 118 Poinsettia Place, 4D — D'ya need the rest?"

"Nope, I've got a directory file on-line. That about covers it." I told

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the legal module to rectify my notes, and pummeled the printout key. "Do you know what you want to buy?"

"A gun."

"Right. . . . Why don't you let me pick something out for you? I believe in providing service as well as hardware." I gave him a copy of his S/I. "Can you read? Good. Go over the stuff on the back, and if you don't have any questions, you can go ahead and signify on the front bottom."

While he was reading, or pretending to read, all that informed-consent junk about justifiable homicide, bystander liability, and forfeiture of profit, I leaned back in my high chair and scratched myself.

I could have the system pick something out, but a man who doesn't know his own merchandise shouldn't be in business. Let's see: his puto of a father is going to be sure as shit armed; all those bugs — the skinners, the pain freaks, the baby rapers — are usually jag paranoid. With reason. Probably even Kevlar polylaminate underwear, and I doubted the kid was up to a precision hit. If it happens, it'll have to be a one-shot, can't-miss deal. I was going to have to find Billy about as luck-free a rig as he can afford.

Something special for an up-front, first-strike gig. . . . I slapped my big belly. *Ya chole*! That beauty that Caravaggio put out in their fall catalog. A couple of strokes, and there it was in all its sleek titanium glory. Damn, that gun was a beautiful piece of work. You've got to hand it to those Torino workshops; they make the prettiest tools, bar none.

I scrolled down to the specs to refresh my memory, and drool a little.

> Caravaggio "Sorpresa" S3
> Derringer-class shotgun — single round.
> Length: 128mm
> Weight: 531g with shell
> Effective range: 4.5 meters with spread of 1 meter^2
> Ammo: 12-gauge load of 16 pellets.
> Recoil impulse about 5 foot-pounds.
> — With his wrists, no problem. —
> Wakizashi neurocoupled Target Designator/Sight
> Operational data: At 2 meters, pellets have a residual energy approx. 55% greater than that of a 9mm round at the same range. Will overcome Class 1 resistance. Upon penetration, pellets shred

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into razor-edged filaments, thus providing maximum damage with minimal egress.
— In other words, evisceration without gore. —
Self-contouring arm holster has a removable strip impregnated with 1 dose of Cool Hand™ (microinjected)

That last bit was a nice touch; *Cool Hand*'s the best and quickest of the beta-blocker/amphetamine mixes. Make a tight fist, and in 1.5 seconds or less, you get a steady mind and a fast aim. Hell, I remember back when the old NCAA banned beta-blocker use in shooting events because it reduced performance anxiety. *Cool Hand* would have driven them crazy. The purists are still bitching — screw them.

I checked the list price: F$507.95 for the gun and holster, and F$2.98 per round. A nice sale. Billy's account would just barely cover it. I gave him the quote, and he agreed.

The stock number was green, so I called up the warehouse. As I waited for the item to come down the belt, I tried to give the kid some tips. "Don't talk to him, not a fucking word. Try and get him in a doorway. Aim at him as if you were pointing your finger; the auto-tracker will make sure you're accurate. Anywhere above the waist will be fine." He didn't say anything, just kept his arms folded tight against his sides and swayed a little, but he looked like he was listening.

When the box arrived, I took it out and ran him through the mechanics. He had a little trouble adjusting the *Cool Hand* strip — the microinjectors felt like cat's fur, and he was ticklish — but all in all, he caught on real fast, a bright boy.

"You're all set. Put your thumb on the sales slip. Don't worry; your copy will be the only permanent record."

I heat-stapled the slip to his S/I. "When the Public Interrogators show up, give them that. A quick Truthtell session, and it'll be all over." He didn't pick up the paperwork. I could tell he wasn't paying attention, so I started to repeat what I had just said, when he interrupted me.

"Can I buy another round?"

I looked at those dark eyes washed with tears, and nodded.

So I sold him the mercy shot at cost.

What can I say? I'm just a goddamn sentimental *cholo*.

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Ronald Anthony Cross wrote "Every Trembling Blossom, Every Singing Bird," (March 1990) and "All the Way To Teelee Town (September 1990). His new story concerns the activities of a fifth grade class, but be warned that there is some pretty strong stuff in this account of a teacher who may be an awful creature from another world and a student, Elizabeth Ellen Ambstead, who may be the most unforgettable, not to say the meanest, youngster you have ever met.

Hanging Out with Bitsy

By Ronald Anthony Cross

NOBODY VISITS ME here, but they let me have my Nintendo. At home I also have a Turbo-Grafx, and the graphics and sound are great, but the games aren't so hot. Not yet, anyway. By the time they let me out, though — if they ever let me out. . . . And if they don't — don't — I don't want to talk about that.

I know about all the stuff that might happen to me. That's one of the things about Doc Freidman (he likes it when I call him "Doc"): he always tells me everything straight out.

"I don't intend to let any of that happen to you," he said. "I'm really on your side, and I'm going to do everything I can, which is considerable."

He talks to me like an adult. Which is the only way to talk to me. Bitsy, too, the little bitch. The rest of them — in my class back at school, I mean — you have to talk to them like kids. They just do what the adults want them to do. Hear what they want them to hear. See what they want them to see. Which maybe is why only me and Bitsy could see Miss Cline, what she really was. —No, that's not it. It's got to be something else.

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Something more. Something special about me and Bitsy. Maybe somehow we're more like Miss Cline.

Let's see, where was I? Oh yeah, Doc says he's going to try his best to see that nothing really terrible happens to me, which is why I'm here in Observation for such a long time. Doc says really, it's the best place for me right now. And it's best to drag it out as long as we can. Delaying tactics. "Besides," he says, "you're worth observing."

"Why? Because I'm crazy?"

"You're not just crazy," Doc says, looking very serious; "you're absolutely wacko." You have to laugh at that, right? Then he has to reassure me, though, and he says something like: "Seriously, I know that what you've told me is the truth. That is, that what you've told me is what you believe you've experienced."

"And Bitsy," I always throw in.

"Bitsy says otherwise," Doc reminds me. Which I don't need reminding of. That little bitch.

Let me tell you about Bitsy. Elizabeth Ellen Ambstead. Big name for such a little girl, right? In fact, any name is a big name for any girl that little. Which is why everyone calls her "Bitsy." Littlest kid in fifth grade, and mean as a snake. Mom always said I'd get in trouble hanging out with Bitsy. Well, right you are, Mom. First time, but what the heck.

"Did you see what Miss Cline did in class this morning?" Bitsy said.

"I don't know what you mean," I answered.

"Bullshit," Bitsy said in her typical cute little manner. "You do too know, only you're too chickenshit to look at it. It's right there in your memory; all you have to do is look."

"She told me not to," I said without thinking about it. "Jesus, why did I say that?"

"You see?" Bitsy was jumping up and down with excitement. "You see? Gotcha."

And I guess that was the real beginning. The waking up, or whatever you want to call it.

That very afternoon, when Miss Cline did the thing, whatever you call it, it was like I had changed somehow, and I could see it all and hear it all. Oh, I still couldn't move or do anything about it. But I could see it, and nobody could make me forget it. So when she told us all that we wouldn't be able to remember any of it when we woke up, it was like a joke or

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something, because I was already wide-awake. I couldn't move or anything, but I was plenty awake. Me and Bitsy, the bitch.

Sometimes she did it for a long time. And then she did real — what's the word — elaborate things. And now that I was awake, I could remember all the times before. All the crazy, nasty, mean things she did. Like take off all her clothes and walk around the classroom naked, for instance. (She did that often.) And once, even, I remember Mrs. Brice from next door came in, but Miss Cline froze her just like that, and punched her in the stomach a couple of times, and said, "Bet you're going to wonder where that stomachache came from, aren't you, you old bat?"

Anyway, this time it was Ashford. Everyone hates Ash — teachers, kids, probably even parents.

To start with, he's a dumb Jew. If you can imagine that. My mother says (I'm half-Jewish) that there's no such thing as a stupid Jew, but Ashford's it. In the second place, he's a total traitor to everything and everyone. In the third place, he's always picking fights, and he's probably the worst fighter in the whole school. A Jew who's a bully.

"You can't possibly be a Jew," I said.

"I'm not a Jew, asshole," he said. "My parents are Jews. I'm an atheist." Then he gives the finger to God, naturally. Which actually causes Patricia (the class goody-goody) to cry. Patricia always managed somehow to be wherever it was necessary for her to be in order to hear whatever would upset her the most. Come to think of it, that's kind of a magic act, too, I guess.

Anyhow, Miss Cline was writing down a list on the blackboard of animals that help mankind in some way or other, as the class called them out to her. A real treat for us intellectuals, as you can imagine. But that's what school is like. Someone mentioned pigs, and Ash went into his act. Jumped out of his seat oinking and snorting, and making a farting noise by sticking one hand in his armpit and slapping the other one against his side. But the bad part is that once he started, he just would not stop. Which is typical of Ash: the class, naturally, all laughing and shouting dumb comments about pigs and egging him on. Except for Bitsy, who merely looked at me and scrunched up her face.

"That's enough, Ashford," Miss Cline said. But of course, it wasn't enough for Ash, who just went on and on making ugly piglike (to him) noises, and jumping around flapping his arms.

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"That's it," Miss Cline said. "Oh, that is it, you disgusting little cretins." And froze us, just like that.

But this time, for whatever reason, was not to be one of her long, drawn-out affairs, so she just went right over to Ash, who was standing there with his hand stuck in his armpit and his pig expression on his face. Good thing I couldn't laugh here, because I sure would have.

"Oh, you're a fucking little pig, all right," Miss Cline snarled as she took hold of his hair with her left hand and held his head steady while she slapped him back and forth across both cheeks over and over, really hard. I mean, she was slapping him so hard I couldn't see how she could backhand his right cheek like that without hurting her hand.

"Probably broke my hand, but it was worth it." Which scared me even more than I already was scared, if that was possible. Coud she read minds, on top of everything else?

This time she just turned and walked back over to the blackboard and brought us out of it. Ash tried to go on with his pig routine. But suddenly staggered and put both hands up to his face. The class's laughter and noise died out.

"Why, what's wrong, Ashford?" Miss Cline said innocently. "My goodness, your cheeks are bright red. You must be coming down with something." All this time she was fondling her right hand with her left. Bitsy just turned around and looked at me. I nodded. And that was the beginning.

BUT WHAT can we do?" I said later. "We're just kids. She's an adult. A teacher, for God's sake. She's got every advantage."

Bitsy was smiling. Shaking her head.

"Come on, Bitsy. Get real. We're just plain kids. She's not only an adult; she's some kind of superwoman or witch or something."

"Creature from Planet X," Bitsy threw in.

"Cowabunga," I said. "Maybe she's a teenage mutant ninja turtle."

"Well, let me tell ya, kid," Bitsy said, "she's not a turtle, and she's no teenager; but mutant — maybe so. Something from outer space — maybe. Witch? I can't buy that one. Maybe what people thought of as a witch. I don't know. But I like the idea of a mutant, or anyhow, some kind of new development, see? Because if she's from outer space, see, then the big question is . . ." Bitsy drug it out with a big pause. ". . . What about us?"

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For a moment we both just stood there without saying anything, as she waited for it to sink in.

"What do you mean, what about us?" I yelled. Bitsy shushed me, because after all, we were on the playground. But nobody paid any attention to us. Too much loud stuff was going on all around us all the time. And we were over by the basketball courts. Every few moments the fourth- and fifth-grade jocks would run by us screaming, shouting, and cussing at each other in what passed for a basketball game, but what was really just an endless war over who got to be point guard. Even the big, slow centers wanted to be point guard: and though there were a couple of really good players at our school, mostly the games were decided by who could call the most fouls, so how good you were didn't make much difference. Every time they would go from one end of the court to the other, about three different people would call fouls, and then everybody would fight over it.

"What do you mean, what about us?" I repeated in a softer voice.

"O.K.," Bitsy said, with an expression on her face like you have when you are trying to explain the workings of the universe to fools. Which I am not. I am the smartest kid in school. Except maybe for Bitsy, I guess.

"She freezes you so that you can't move, right? Then how can you see all the stuff she's doing, if you can't move?"

What she said frightened me in some strange new way, and unfortunately, I was already frightened so much in so many ways I felt sick. More fear was not exactly what I needed here.

"Our eyes can still move," I said, knowing it was not true.

Bitsy just shook her head.

"No way, José," she said. "We were seeing stuff that was going on all around us, maybe even behind us. But we weren't seeing it *with our eyes.*"

For a long time, we just stood there, silent. Finally the bell rang. Two of the jocks on the basketball court were in a fistfight over some imaginary foul or other, and everybody was shouting encouragement or discouragement or whatever, so that we couldn't have heard each other anyway. But really, there was nothing more to say. As usual, Bitsy was right.

"Big question is," I said, when the fight broke off and the jocks ran back to class, "does Miss Cline know it?"

"Or," Bitsy threw in, "how long will it take her to find it out?"

And if I wasn't scared enough before, I can guarantee you that I was now. A cold, sickening burst of fear. So that I almost had to throw up,

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and couldn't run back to class with Bitsy, but had to walk slowly by myself. Because, what even Bitsy hadn't thought of, that had just come to me, was that somehow Bitsy had been able to know about me. Wouldn't Miss Cline have that same talent?

It seemed to me when I entered the classroom that Miss Cline's fierce, dark eyes fastened on me like the eyes of a snake. "You're late, Tony," she said. "Why are you late?"

I went home from school early that day, sick (fear is sickness), but my mom was so mad at being stuck with me and having to leave her job early that she stomped around the house slamming all the doors and shelves and mumbling to herself about how important her job was, and somehow, though it doesn't make sense, scaring me even worse than I was before. Part of it was, I guess, that now, for the first time, I recognized that a lot of the ugly, mean things she was mumbling were things she wasn't really saying out loud, but just thinking.

The next day was our field trip to the tide pools, and I decided I might as well go along. For one thing, I figured we would be out in the open, and Miss Cline wouldn't really dare do much out there, not with all those other people around. (But I was wrong.) And for another, it was a good chance to get together with Bitsy and try to figure out what to do. And to tell you the truth, I couldn't stand the thought of laying around the house and listening to all the awful stuff going on in my miserable mother's mind, while she stalked around the house thinking about how talented and important she was, and how me and Dad were holding her back from greatness — sure, Mom.

But the field trip was a disaster from start to finish.

In the first place, the bus ride was the all-time most terrible bus ride ever. Practically everybody behaved awful — led, of course, by Ash, who shouted, farted, pulled hair, threw food, made odd disgusting noises, licked the back of Patricia's neck (causing her to scream, cry, slap at him, etc.)

The bus driver was this big, mean, surly dude who actually kept stopping the bus — I mean pulling clear over to the side of the road and even taking an off-ramp from the freeway twice — and parking and then standing up and lecturing us about how he couldn't drive if we made any noise, because he wouldn't be able to hear an ambulance or police car and might get into an accident. (Here Ashford illustrated his speech by helpfully wailing like a siren.)

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"Oh children, please, please, you must be quiet," Mrs. Morgan (one of the mothers who came along) would shout in her anxious voice, followed by Patricia tearfully begging all of us to mind Mrs. Morgan, Miss Cline, and Bill, the driver.

But I don't know why everyone behaved so badly. I wonder if maybe they all don't have some sort of ability like me and Bitsy, only not enough to know about it. Anyway, it was the world's worst bus trip. And when we finally got to the tide pools, it got worse.

The local tide pools — surprise, surprise — turned out to be just a few grungy rocks, covered with slimy, slippery green gunk. Also, there were no crabs, starfish, sea urchins, scallops, etc. Not even a couple of sand dollars. Just a few empty Coke cans and a condom — which naturally Ashford found, and then went on and on describing its purpose (as best he could) to the rest of us. I couldn't believe or even really picture what he was telling me here, but somehow I knew it was the awful truth. Wow — talk about gross-out!

Meanwhile, poor Mrs. Morgan, who had a list of creatures to look for in the tide pools, had to be told that she would never be able to spot an Atlantic dog whelk because this was the Pacific Ocean. Her list apparently just had stuff on it from any tide pool anywhere, all mixed together with big descriptions of how to recognize each thing.

"I just saw a hermit crab, Miss Cline," Patricia lied sweetly. "I did so. It ran away and hid over there." Everyone ran over to where she pointed, in a desperation attempt to spot something on these barren rocks we called the tide pools.

"Maybe we should have gone farther up the coast," Mrs. Morgan muttered sadly, which caused even dull-witted Ashford to laugh.

Then there was the bus trip back. Off the freeway, over to the side and park, and jolly driver Bill delivers the same, long, drawn-out speech again. Back up the on-ramp, onto the freeway, and guess what? Yes, again. Bill is so concerned that he will not hear sirens. Oh yeah, sure he is, the mean son of a bitch.

Finally we just had to stop the bus for a while and get out and move around a little. Even though Bill patiently explained that nobody told him he was supposed to stop and wait around while we did whatever we were going to do here. He was just supposed to drive straight to the tide pools and then straight back. But I guess when he saw Miss Cline's eyes, he

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decided to just grumble the rest so nobody could hear it, and do whatever she said. He was tough, but not that tough.

Well, there is a park that runs for a long ways along the edge of the cliffs in Santa Monica. There is a long, low gray fence made out of concrete or something that is supposed to keep you from going over the edge. That is where the terrible thing happened. And you know what? I don't even know why. Just all the little things adding up, I guess, until Miss Cline just couldn't stand it anymore, and just . . . did what she did.

Ash, of course, was the main problem, as always. But it really wasn't anything special, as I look back on it. And believe me, I do look back on it. A lot.

Part of it was that when the kids got loose in the park, they all went a little wild. Running this way and that. Screaming, pushing each other. And Mrs. Morgan just kept whining, "Children, children," like she couldn't believe it. And Patricia was going on and on, blathering to Miss Cline about how she would never do this or that. And it was too hot.

And that was when Ash climbed up onto the low gray fence and shouted in his hoarse, dirty voice, "Hey, hey, looka me, everybody. I'm gonna jump. Ha ha."

"Oh no, no," Mrs. Morgan screamed. "Please don't jump."

And there was Patricia, clinging to the long skirt Miss Cline was wearing, so that she almost caused Miss Cline to trip and go down as she struggled to turn and move toward Ashford.

"Oh Miss Cline," Patricia screamed. "Stop him. Stop him. Oh, I'm so scared." And still clinging to Miss Cline's skirt, she burst into tears. As always. I guess it was all of that. And the dumb bus driver. And weeks and weeks of that kind of stuff. Maybe years; I don't know.

Anyway, I did not think she would do the thing here. I guess neither Bitsy or me had any idea of the extent of her powers. But we do now.

"That's enough," Miss Cline shouted. And she froze us all: The kids in her class. People in the park. People driving cars. The cars. Cats. Dogs. Bugs, probably. It doesn't make any sense, and it isn't possible, but she did it.

And yes, now that Bitsy had pointed it out to me, I felt my consciousness spread out like a cloud of billowing smoke, moving fast. In front of me, behind me. Down the streets in Santa Monica, where, yes, everything and everyone was frozen. Stopped. Outside of time.

I could see everything so clearly. More clearly than ever before. Like

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an exquisite, clearer-than-life still photograph. All at once.

Only, now it snapped back and zeroed in on Miss Cline, as, cursing and mumbling awful swear words, she tore little Patricia's hands loose from her skirt and stalked over to where Ashford straddled the fence.

There was no way for me to turn away as she pushed him explosively, knocking him off the top of the fence and sending him rolling toward the edge of the cliff, which was so close that he easily made it and went over.

There was no way for me — or Bitsy, I suppose — to turn away as the body turned and twisted endlessly through the empty air, and finally, still outside of time, smashed itself on the ground below. There was no way to turn away when she did the other, even more terrible, thing. As there was no way for us to understand it.

Still mumbling vile, insane things to herself, she stalked back over to where she had been, and scooped up Patricia in her arms. Then she giggled. Yes, she giggled. Carried Patricia over to the gray fence and threw her over, where she rolled off the edge and fell and crashed to bits on the ground far, far below, along the side of the highway, where, yes, the cars as far as the eye could see, and beyond, were frozen in mid-flight.

"And one more for the road," Miss Cline shouted to herself. And laughed out loud.

Then she got control of herself and brought us out of it. I knew not to scream. Or fall down. I just held myself there, swaying, waiting. And I guess Bitsy did, too.

After what seemed like an eternity, Miss Cline yelled, "My God, he jumped! Patricia tried to stop him, and they both went over together." I let myself fall to the grass, and beyond that into the cool, cool dark where nothing was happening at all.

THE BEST thing about all this was that it gave Bitsy and me a brief reprieve, since none of us had to go back to school for the rest of the week, after the "tragedy," as they put it.

Right at first, from what Bitsy told me (Bitsy stayed conscious — the little bitch was made of sterner stuff than me), right at first, no one would accept it. After all, the last thing they remembered seeing was Patricia clinging to Miss Cline's skirt, crying, and Ashford straddling the gray fence. But after a short while, they not only believed Miss Cline's version, but some of them claimed to have seen it. The brave little goody-

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goody Patricia rushing over to save the school pervert-bully-dweeb. The two of them struggling, falling on the wrong side of the fence, and somehow, still tangled up, rolling off the edge. Into forever.

I was unconscious all the way home. This, I am told, was the beginning of my breakdown. Or worse, my breakup. Yet another wrong theory after the fact. Sometimes I wonder how much of everything we see or do is really different from what we put together afterward for this reason or that. To make things fit.

Well, a couple of days later, and there was Bitsy over at my house. The only girl in fifth grade who would go visit a boy. And get by with it. Lucky me.

"No way," I told her when she explained to me what we had to do. But of course, I knew she was right. As always.

"Besides," she said, "you couldn't cut it, remember? I'm maybe O.K. for a while, but you — you fainted, sweetie pie. Do you think she doesn't suspect something there? Oh, she's probably not sure, but she suspects. There's no way out, Tony baby: that bitch has got to die. Now!"

And, as I just said, she was obviously right, as usual.

At first my dad balked a little at the idea. I'm sure he was connecting my request with the morbid events of a few days ago. And so he resisted. A little.

"But why do you now, all of sudden, take an interest in my guns? I thought you said that hunting animals was murder," he whined. "Didn't you say that, Tony?"

He looked very hurt. Poor Daddy. An accountant. A small, owl-eyed man, gentle intellectual. But he loved his guns.

"You said it yourself, Dad. It's safer if I know how to use them. What if I have to use them? To tell you the truth, Dad, ever since that . . . that awful accident, I've been feeling scared. I think I'd feel better if I knew how to defend myself against prowlers."

Dad knew about being scared of prowlers, muggers, bullies and lots of other stuff besides. Soon he was bubbling over with enthusiasm, showing me his gun collection, demonstrating this and that. Lecturing me on the righteousness of it all.

"Guns don't kill people," he said; "people do.

"Oh, you like this little baby, do you?" he said, after I kept bringing his

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attention back to the little snub-nosed .38.

"Light as a feather, but she kicks like a mule. You gotta hold your arms out straight like this, and just squeeze the trigger." He demonstrated (comically, though not realizing it) the FBI two-handed, fast-draw stance. Explained about how the shot would probably hit a little high and to my left even if I squeezed off the trigger carefully, let alone jerked it.

"Aim right at his belly button," he said excitedly, eyes big as an owl's, as if he knew just whose belly button we were aiming at here. As I said, a gentle man, but he loves his guns.

Afterward he carefully locked the cabinet up and showed me where he kept the key.

"I know I can trust you, Son," he said affectionately (now that we had shared guns). "Remember, the .38, I keep that little baby loaded and ready to go. So you can relax. This house is safe."

Next day was Monday, and it was back to school again. I won't say I was feeling scared anymore, because in some odd way, I was scared beyond feeling anything. I was scared numb. And just a little sick to my stomach. It was like I couldn't sleep, and yet I couldn't wake up, and so everything was like a dream.

On the school bus, I kept forgetting what was in my lunch box. Wondering why it was so heavy. Then I would remember, Oh yeah, like in a dream a long time ago, sneaking into the den with the key to the cabinet. There was no turning back.

"First thing," was all Bitsy said to me. "Before she has a chance to figure it out or do anything weird. First thing — all right?"

"Why wait?" I said.

Then somehow I was in the classroom — I must have floated there without noticing — and Bitsy rushed right over and started hassling Miss Cline about something, trying to keep her attention while I came around the other side of her desk and opened up the lunch box.

I was standing slightly behind her; and as I said, Bitsy was yelling at her, keeping her attention, but the kids could see what I was doing.

The classroom went quiet. Completely quiet. The strange thing is that nobody screamed or shouted or pointed at me or anything. Maybe they were in the same dream I was in.

But Miss Cline knew something was wrong. And quick, quicker even than I could squeeze the trigger, she did her thing, and I felt the world

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freeze, and I was too late. And it was all over.

Except for Bitsy. Just as Miss Cline stood up from her chair and turned to face me, I felt the sudden surge of force from Bitsy reach out and seize Miss Cline and freeze her there, just as she had frozen the rest of us. And at the same time, I felt myself come out of it.

"Hurry," Bitsy said. "I can't hold the bitch long." And with another odd shock, I realized that she was speaking to me with her mind.

For a moment I couldn't see because I was crying, but my arms were out straight, and the gun was already aimed, and there was only one thing to do with it. I finished squeezing off the trigger, and I didn't miss, and I didn't hit high or to the left, and I wasn't aiming at her belly button. I just blew her brains out.

And so here I am. Absolutely no visitors, right? So one day I turn around, and there's Bitsy. Just like that.

"Well, well, well," I said. "The itsy-Bitsy spider climbed up the waterspout."

She walked over to me. Beautiful beyond belief. All huge, dark, glittering eyes and tangled hair. Like a wild thing.

She took my nose and, without changing expression, pinched it painfully.

"And it pinched your fucking nose till all your brains leaked out." Which is typical Bitsy, all right.

"How did you get in here, you little bitch?"

Bitsy shrugged. "What would have been the point of my telling everybody what I saw? Then we'd both be stuck in here."

I didn't say anything.

"I convinced Dr. Freidman that it would be good for me to talk to you. Convince you I wasn't experiencing what you thought I was, you know. In fact, I may have nudged him a little. With my mind. I can do that, Tony. And I'll bet you can, too. Or you can learn to. You can get yourself out of here. Maybe. In a while."

"But why are you here, Bitsy?"

"Because I need your help. Because there are more of them."

I put my hands over my eyes. "My head hurts," I said.

"Lots more," she continued. "Because, you know Miss Bryant? Second grade? I wonder why so many of them become teachers? To hurt us while

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we're young and helpless, do you think? To ruin us before we can fight back?

"But what the hell can I do, Bitsy? I'm stuck here. Locked up. Shot down. Forever, right?"

"I need a needle," Bitsy said. "This is a hospital, right? So get me a needle. I'll take care of the rest."

"In the first place," I said, having difficulty speaking because I was still crying, "where could you get the poison to put in the needle?"

"Just you get me the needle, O.K.? The world is full of poison. Half the stuff you eat is poison. Cigarettes are poison. Did you know you could put a bunch of cigarettes in a bowl of water, and a few days later, you'd have enough nicotine to kill an elephant? Or how about Drano? How 'bout if I shoot her full of Drano?"

"And in the second place," I continued, "there's got to be some other way."

But Bitsy shook her head. The bitch had to die.

"Oh Bitsy," I said, still crying, "you are crazy."

And I put my hands on her small, delicate shoulders and drew her to me and kissed her on the mouth. Which shocked her. And shocked me. "You're so crazy."

But now I could see that Miss Cline was crazy, and Ashford was crazy, and, in a weird way, so was Patricia and all those crazy jocks fighting over who was going to be point guard, and poor Mrs. Morgan and her Atlantic dog whelk. We were all crazy, and we were all driving each other crazy. And in a world where everyone's crazy, I figure the only thing to do is stand by someone you love. No matter what she does.

And I love you, Bitsy. You crazy, mean little bitch. I love you.

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Richard Paul Russo ("Prayers of A Rain God," May 1987) was the winner of the Philip K. Dick Award for his second novel, SUBTERRANEAN GALLERY. His new story is strong and compelling SF about three men and two women drifting in the interstellar equivalent of a lifeboat.

The Open Boat

By Richard Paul Russo

ALL OF THEM knew the color of the sky. They did not look out at it anymore, but they knew — black, unending black, blacker than night. No stars; nothing.

They drifted in a nonsector of the nonuniverse. That's what Jackal had called it just a while ago — a nonsector of the nonuniverse. He was the amateur astrophysicist; he was the one who was supposed to know. Sara pictured herself in an open boat, rising and falling with ocean swells. The reality, of course, was nothing like that.

They were not in a boat, exactly, though it was, in theory, the interstellar equivalent of a lifeboat, and it was not open, though the canopies could be retracted from viewing ports so they could look out at the blackness all around them. But no one did that anymore.

There were three men and two women, though one of the men, Hallic, was hardly more than a boy, really, seventeen, eighteen years old. The

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boy was catatonic, sat against the wall without moving, without speaking, eyes open and hardly blinking. There was Jackal, who did not seem to Sara to be anything like his name — he was quiet, his movements slow and deliberate with an almost surreal economy. There was Cass, a strong, lanky woman who could not seem to stop moving about their cramped quarters. And there was Bertrand, a tall man dressed in clothes more fit for a trek through the mountains than for a starship voyage. And finally there was Sara: disillusioned sound-sculptor and despairing social critic; that was how she had often described herself. But she didn't say anything like that to the others. Neither of those labels seemed particularly relevant in their present circumstances.

The lifeboat hovered completely without motion, held in stasis, moored outside reality.

The lifeboat: two cabins, one in which they slept (there were bunks for six, and a tiny bathroom); one in which they ate, read, talked, did everything else. According to the lifeboat manual, which Cass had found in a wall cubicle, there was food, water, and air for months, perhaps years, assuming all the recyclers remained functional. They had all tried reading the manual during the first couple of days, but only Jackal understood much of it. He appeared to know a lot that was not in the manual. The boat, he explained, was programed to shift, at some randomly determined time, back into the real universe, at which time an automatic beacon would begin broadcasting. There was no control over where they would appear, but there was a 97 percent probability that they would reappear within the Milky Way.

Sara did not find that particularly reassuring.

None of them knew what had happened to the main ship. For the jump into subspace — nonuniverse, Jackal insisted — all passengers entered the lifeboats. If the jump had gone well, they would have remained in the lifeboats for an hour or two, then, after the jump back into real space, they would have returned to their regular cabins.

Apparently the jump had not gone well.

Sara had felt a strange, hollow vibration, a queasy loss of gravity followed by a brief, jolting acceleration, then nothing. She had felt nothing from the lifeboat since.

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The vibration, the drop, and acceleration were all the lifeboat being jettisoned from the main ship, Jackal had later explained. It was a kind of secondary subspace/subspace jump, each of the 350 lifeboats given a different set of vectors. The theory was, Jackal went on, that this way, all the lifeboats would reappear in different parts of the galaxy, and at least some of them might be rescued.

The more Jackal knew, the less reassured Sara felt. She began to wish he'd known nothing.

Sara knelt beside the boy, brushed fingers across his cheek. He did not move.

Bertrand did push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks. Cass paced relentlessly back and forth, from one corner to another. Jackal sat on one of the wall benches and rolled his head, neck bones popping and cracking. Hallic did nothing. Sara watched, doing little more than the boy.

Following the realization that the jump had gone wrong, and that they were in trouble, they had spent the first two or three days making what Sara now saw were futile attempts at forging a united front against their circumstances. Striving for a sense of community, camaraderie. Pulling together to find a way out, a way to survive.

Actually, not all of them. The boy, Hallic, had said almost nothing, speaking only when directly questioned. But even that had not lasted through the first day — he soon withdrew completely, stopped speaking or moving, and they had heard nothing from him since.

As for the others, Sara thought, well, they *had* tried. They had talked about their occupations, where they had come from, where they were going. Families, friends, even enemies. They read and reread the lifeboat manual, discussed options (there weren't any). But none of their discussion had any real value in the end; none of it meant anything. None of it brought them together. None of it could help them.

They soon gave up trying. There was nothing, absolutely nothing they could do, and they knew it.

Sara sat on her own bench (tiny territories had been wordlessly staked out within hours), watching, trying to gauge the passage of time. No sun, no moon, no clock (Sara had no wristwatch, and would not look at any

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of the others). She took a small pleasure in the way time seemed to shift, sometimes moving slowly, sometimes quickly, and always catching her by surprise.

"It's time to feed him again," Cass said. She wasn't looking at the boy, but Sara knew whom she meant.

The boy was naked from the waist down. They had undressed him that much to make the trips to the toilet easier; his body once seated, seemed to know what to do.

"How long before we drop back into real space?" Bertrand asked. He had already asked the question a dozen times, and Jackal had ceased trying to answer.

Sara punched for a foodpac, took it to the boy. She sat beside him, held the open pac to his mouth, and squeezed. As the thick, gluey substance moved into his mouth, the boy chewed, then swallowed. Sara fed him the rest of the pac, then Cass brought a second, and two bulbs of juice. When he was done, Sara washed his face.

"He has a better appetite than I do," Cass said. She looked at Sara, tried to smile, then shrugged.

"How *long*?" Bertrand asked.

There were pens but no paper. Sara discovered seven blank sheets in the back of the lifeboat manual, and tore them out. She wanted to write, but didn't know if she should try writing a story, or start a journal.

If she wrote a story, she could title it "The Open Boat." She had long ago read a story with that title, a story about people in a lifeboat. She closed her eyes and tried to remember exactly how the story had begun. Something about no one knowing the color of the sky. Sara opened her eyes, looked at the closed canopies. Here they all knew the color of the sky, and wished they didn't.

She set aside the paper and pen. Maybe later.

Sara wondered if there were other lifeboats nearby. When she asked, Jackal said that "nearby" was a meaningless word in the nonuniverse. She went to one of the viewing-port canopies.

"If we open all the canopies," she said, "maybe we could see the lights of another lifeboat."

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Jackal snorted. "You really have no conception of what the nonuniverse is all about, do you?"

Sara turned to look at him. "No, I don't," she said. "Do you?"

They slept in shifts — to give themselves privacy to sleep, and a little privacy while awake. Cass and Sara had one shift, Bertrand and Jackal another. A third shift was completely open. The boy slept wherever he was, with no apparent regularity. Jackal programmed his wristwatch to sound off for each shift.

Bertrand did push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks. Cass paced up and down, back and forth. Jackal cracked his neck. The boy did nothing. Sara tried to write.

Day . . ., she began. She glanced up at Jackal. Crack. "How many days has it been since the jump?" she asked.

"Days don't have any meaning in the nonuniverse," he replied.

"How many days?" she asked again.

Jackal looked at her. Then he looked at his wristwatch. "Six and a half," he said.

Day Seven:, Sara wrote. *I would like to strangle Jackal.*

"We are in God's maw," Cass said. Then she laughed.

"We need to stay in shape," Bertrand said. "Physically. Mentally. Here, and when we get back into real space. We don't want to be insane when we're rescued."

Cass stopped pacing, looked at him. "Doctor," she said, "will I be able to play the violin after the operation?"

Jackal laughed. Bertrand looked at Cass, confused. Sara smiled.

"I don't understand," Bertrand finally said.

"It's an old joke," Cass said.

"A *very* old joke," Jackal said.

Sara stopped smiling, watching them. Bertrand breathed in deeply, then started doing more push-ups.

"Oh Christ," Jackal whispered.

"So why do we have gravity?" Cass asked. "Why aren't we floating around in here?"

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"I don't know," Jackal said. "It's an unexplained side effect of a jump into the nonuniverse."

Cass grinned. "*You* don't *know*?"

Jackal glared at her. "No one knows."

DAY TEN: The lifeboat is too small for us. Perhaps it would be different, easier, if we had known each other before this trip, if we had been friends. Perhaps not. Sleep is the best time for me, even with so many strange dreams. Last night ("Night has no no meaning in the nonuniverse," Jackal would say) I dreamed I was performing in an underground grotto, thousands of people in the audience. I was part of an ensemble, with four other sound-sculptors. But when we began to perform the first piece, I found I had forgotten how. I stood on the stage and made awkward, miming motions, shaping no sound at all, hoping no one would notice. Then I woke up.

"How long before we drop back into real space?" Bertrand asked.

Sara looked at Jackal, who returned her gaze for a moment, then looked away. He did not answer.

At first, Bertrand's constant questioning had been annoying, then almost amusing, but now it had become awkward, raising the tension in the cabin.

"Shut up," Cass said. "Just shut the hell up."

It had been far too long, Sara knew. They all knew. Except, perhaps, for Bertrand. She had read the manual, and though it was not very specific, it was clear that the random program to drop the lifeboat back into real space should have activated within a few days at most. Something had gone wrong. There was, as far as she could tell, no backup procedure that would allow them to activate it manually.

"Is it really an unreasonable question?" Bertrand asked. It was first time he had pursued the matter beyond the initial question.

Jackal cracked his neck, then stood and approached Bertrand. When he spoke, his voice was soft and even. "Reasonable or not, you ask that question one more time, and I will smash your head against the wall."

"I think *he* has the right idea," Cass said. She was looking at the boy.

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Sara jerked out of a daze, sat up. A strange, hollow feeling had come upon her, a heavy unease laced with vertigo. It moved through her like a slowly, slowly breathing wave. She lost her sense of time, and couldn't tell how long it was lasting. A few seconds? A few minutes? An hour?

Then it was gone.

She looked around the room, wondering if the others, too, had felt it. They were *all* looking at one another.

"What the *hell* was that?" Cass finally asked.

"It's the nonuniverse leaking through the walls," Jackal replied. "Leaking into us. The walls are breaking down."

"Will it change us?" Sara asked.

Jackal looked at her and snorted. "What do you think?"

Bertrand did push-ups, sit-ups. Jackal cracked his neck. Sara thought about going to bed, thinking she might be tired. She thought her shift might be on. No one could be sure anymore, not since all the wristwatches had ceased to function. Cass apparently was already asleep. She hadn't been in the front cabin for a while.

Sara went to the door, pressed the plate, and the door slid aside. The cabin was dark, and she palmed up the light.

Cass lay naked on a lower bunk, next to the catatonic boy, who, as always, was naked from the waist down. Cass stroked the boy with her hand, her mouth, coaxing an erection from him. She turned to Sara.

"He's got to be good for something, doesn't he?"

Sara backed out and closed the door. She turned, looked at Jackal and Bertrand. Jackal just shrugged. Bertrand, as usual, appeared confused.

Sara returned to her chair, picked up pen and journal. She sat and stared at it for a long time, but did not write a word.

Day Thirteen: Thirteen! It's an arbitrary number. No one has any idea anymore what day it is. All I can do is number these entries consecutively.

I've been thinking about a story, "The Open Boat." It's about four men in a lifeboat from a sinking ship. Working together, cooperating with each other, enduring, they row the lifeboat against the storm, heavy waves, strong currents and tides, eventually reaching shore, and safety. One dies, I think, but the others live. I think about the story, but I find no comfort in it. There is nothing in it that applies here.

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Sara went to one of the viewing ports and retracted the canopy. She looked out into the unending black, seeing nothing. She wondered if, when the canopy retracted, the light from inside the lifeboat traveled out through the viewing port and into the black, into the nonuniverse. If it did, what happened to it out there? If not, what stopped it? She decided she would not ask Jackal.

"We're not going to be rescued," Bertrand said. He looked surprised, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

Jackal snorted.

"Brilliant observation," Cass said.

Sara watched Bertrand and, for some reason she did not completely understand, felt tremendous pity for the man.

Day Seventeen: The waves are coming more frequently now. The nonuniverse leaking through. Not all the time, but once every few hours, perhaps. It's getting hard to tell time, so I can't be sure. It's getting hard to do anything now, even think. But the waves are coming. Do they mean anything? No one knows.

"Close that damn thing." Cass's voice, harsh and dry.

Sara was standing at one of the viewing ports again, the canopy retracted. She turned to look at Cass, who stood in the doorway between the two cabins. There were large, dark patches under her eyes.

"I said close it."

Sara turned back to the port, looked out once more, then closed the canopy.

Bertrand did a few sit-ups, then stopped. Sara could not remember the last time she had seen him do a push-up or a jumping jack. Cass no longer paced the front room. After two or three times, she had quit with the boy, so there was not even that for her. Jackal still cracked his neck, but the sounds were growing louder, and Sara wondered if something was going to break soon. Sara picked up her journal. She stared at it, but could not think of a single thing to write.

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Sara got up and walked through the two cabins, taking inventory. Bertrand standing in the corner, arms outstretched. Jackal on his bench, reading the lifeboat manual. The boy on his back in a bottom bunk, eyes open, staring at the bunk above him. Cass in an upper bunk, curled up tight, asleep. Sara returned to her seat. They were all still here.

"How long before we drop back into real space?"

Sara looked up, wondering what Jackal would do to Bertrand. But then, as she saw Bertrand asleep in the corner, a real fear dug into her. It was Jackal who had asked the question.

Sara picked up her journal, glanced through it. The last words written were *Day Nineteen*. There was no entry.

She wondered how long ago that had been. When she thought about it, she was surprised she had been able to keep up with the entries as long as she had.

Sara flipped back to the first page, stared at it without reading any of the words. She thought about reading all the entries, first to last. Instead, she dropped the journal to the floor.

Ther were no mirrors in the lifeboat, no polished metal surfaces to act as a substitute. Sara wasn't sure she remembered what she looked like. She approached one of the viewing ports and retracted the canopy, certain she would be able to see herself in the port glass. But there was nothing there, not even a glint of light, as if the nonuniverse outside sucked away her reflection, returning nothing.

"The second law," Jackal whispered.

"The second law?" Sara said. "Second law of what?"

But Jackal did not answer. He did not even look at her. The second law, Sara thought. Of thermodynamics? She couldn't think of anything else. Was that the one about entropy? Or inertia? She wasn't sure. She wasn't sure if it even mattered. They weren't in the universe anymore. Did the second law of thermodynamics apply here? Did *anything* apply here?

Sara was fairly sure she was not sleeping anymore. She still dreamed, but she did so while awake, her eyes open. The visual aspects of her

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dreams overlaid her surroundings, so that she saw both at the same time. And sometimes, when a wave of the nonuniverse moved through her while she dreamed, a third reality joined the other two, each remaining distinct, yet connecting with one another, forming new and wonderful patterns, opening new worlds to her. And when that happened, she wished for it to never stop.

Inventory. Sara was losing track of everything. It was slower, harder each time. Bertrand. Jackal. Cass. Hallic. Herself. Everyone was still here.

Sara realized she had not eaten in a long time. And nothing to drink. For days. Weeks, perhaps. She could not remember when she had last eaten. She could not remember when she had last used the toilet. She could not remember when she had last seen *any* of them eat or drink. Perhaps they no longer needed food or water to live.

It occurred to her then that they would never starve, never die of thirst, no matter how long they were stranded. They could go on forever.

Panic swept through her. She wanted to ask Jackal if it was possible, but when she opened her mouth, no sound emerged. Just as quickly as it had come, the panic left her.

She could not remember the last time any of them had spoken.

Inventory. One, two, three men. A woman. Herself. Was that everyone?

Sara stood at the viewing port, the canopy retracted. She stared out into the emptiness, the unending black. She had not moved in a long time, not even to look around the cabin. She no longer knew if the others were still here with her.

For a long time, she had wondered when it would end. Not anymore. She knew, now.

It did not end. Ever.

Ever.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THIS PITILESS STORM

I CAN SOMETIMES be talked into doing something I don't really want to do, if it is placed half a year to a year in the future. After all (I say to myself) the world may well come to an end by that time, and I won't have to do it, so why not be agreeable?

And then, of course, the world *doesn't* come to an end, and I am stuck with my promise.

Many months ago, I carelessly agreed to get onto a sailboat and cruise New York Harbor for three hours. Having made the promise, I of course forgot all about it until the day before the event, when my dear wife, Janet, who knows me, said, "I suppose you've forgotten we're going on the sailboat tomorrow."

I answered, as expected, "What sailboat?" She told me, and I groaned piteously, but we had to go.

As it turned out, the weather was perfect, the sky was clear, the temperature was delightful, there was the brightest full Moon I have ever seen, and the skyline of the land areas about the harbor (especially Manhattan, of course) were breathtaking in their beauty.

But all that is beside the point. The point is that it was a Tuesday, and every Tuesday I preside over the luncheon meetings of the Dutch Treat Club and have a great old time.

This time, however, I received specific instructions. "You cut it short, Isaac," said Janet. "We have to leave at 4:30, and I want you home in time to take a nap before we go."

I did as I was told and, as soon as I finished eating, I rose to leave, skipping the post-meal talk, which is the best part. Naturally, I was not my usual sunny self, and my expression was so disagreeable and lowering, I frightened the others.

They called out, "What's the matter, Isaac? Is something wrong?"

"Yes," I replied, grinding my

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teeth. "I've got to go out on a sailboat for a three-hour cruise of New York Harbor, and I won't get a chance to sit home and work."

I fully expected to have everyone burst into tears of sympathy, but they did *not*. Instead, they burst into laughter, one and all, and many were the jocose remarks I had to listen to about what a hard life I led, being forced to cruise instead of work.

But it *is* a hard life when that happens, and no matter how beautiful the cruise was, I mourned the loss of an evening's work.

However, I'm working right now, and *this* is what I consider fun, relaxation and pleasure. So let's get on with it —

The most dramatic storm in all literature, to my way of thinking, is the storm into which King Lear was thrust by his ungrateful daughters in Act III of that play. (The play, incidentally, is not about ingratitude or injustice or anything like that. What the play is really about is the regeneration of a man through suffering.)

Lear had spent his entire adult life as a tyrannical monarch, sopping up admiration and striking out impulsively in all directions. He is shown at his worst at the beginning, when he asks for sycophantic praise, then bespatters his one worthy daughter, Cordelia, with cursings because she wouldn't oblige him. Believe me, he deserved what he got.

Then, in the storm, when he was at his lowest pitch, a miraculous change comes over him, which Shakespeare, being a miraculous writer, makes us believe. Alone on the stage, this eighty-year old man, who had never before in his life given a thought to anyone but himself, is driven by adversity to think of others. He says:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.

With that, Lear begins to change, and by the end of the play, he is a new man who has learned how to live. *That* gives the play its happy ending despite the fact that Lear and Cordelia both die pitifully.

I think of the terrifying scene of "this pitiless storm" frequently, but, being who I am, I can't help but also think that anything the Earth can produce, any storm it can whomp

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out, is but a baby's puff to storms on other worlds. Consider Jupiter, for instance, which is the largest of the planets of our Solar system, with 11.2 times the diameter of Earth and 317.8 times its mass.

Naturally, it was not till modern times that there was the slightest indication that Jupiter was so large. It was seen as only a dot of light in the sky. To be sure (if we omit the Sun and the Moon) only Venus was brighter than Jupiter, and Venus shone for only a few hours after Sunset or before Sunrise. Jupiter, nearly as bright, could shine in the sky all night, and it seemed natural, then, to name it for the predominant god, which was Jupiter to the Romans (and to us).

It was not until January 1610 that anyone saw Jupiter as more than a dot of light. In that month, Galileo looked at Jupiter with the telescope he had built, on hearing a rumor that something of the sort had been invented in the Netherlands.

He found that Jupiter was expanded into a tiny circle of light by the telescope, so that one could think of it to be a world. He also found four lesser bodies (which we now call "satellites") that circled Jupiter, showing for the first time that something in the heavens circled a body other than the Earth. This was an important step toward establishing the heliocentric theory of Copernicus, to the effect that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of the planetary system.

Galileo's telescope was too small and primitive to show him any markings on Jupiter. So were the telescopes that succeeded him. Not only were they small and inefficient but they made use of lenses that refracted different colors differently so that no matter how carefully they were focussed they exhibited "chromatic aberration" in which everything had rings of color about it that confused the details.

Even so, fugitive glimpses were caught of markings on Jupiter's surface. In the 1660s, several observers reported having sighted darkish bands stretching across Jupiter. Thus, the English scientist Robert Hooke (1635-1703) reported in 1664 that he had seen them. The Italian-French astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini (1625-1712) reported them in 1665. Though Cassini was behind Hooke in this, he did something with his observation. For one thing, he suggested that the markings were cloud formations, which was correct. For another, he followed the markings as they made their way about the planet so that he was the first to measure Jupiter's speed of rotation.

It was 9 hours and 56 minutes, which was amazingly short, since

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the much smaller Earth takes 24 hours to rotate about its axis. It was this very rapid rotation of Jupiter that explained why its outline was distinctly elliptical. The existence of a large centrifugal effect gave it an enormous equatorial bulge, much larger than Earth's puny one. (Saturn, though rotating somewhat more slowly than Jupiter, is made up of lighter materials and has a still larger equatorial bulge — the largest in the Solar system.)

Cassini also found that Jupiter rotated most rapidly at the equator (at least, it did so at the point where the bulge was at its peak, and everyone rightly assumed this to be the equator). Farther to the north and south, the rotation period was only 9 hours and 50 minutes. This was not surprising, since it could be assumed that all we saw of Jupiter was the top of the cloud layer. Naturally, the clouds might not necessarily rotate all in one piece.

Jupiter's rotation rate was determined more accurately by later astronomers, but the corrections were not greater than a few seconds.

In 1842, the German astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel (1784-1846) pointed out that it was possible to make use of Newton's law of gravitation to determine the mass of Jupiter by noting the distance of its satellites and their periods of revolution about the planet.

He was the first to make it clear that Jupiter was over three hundred times as massive as Earth. From its volume, however, it should have been more massive still. In point of fact, it had only a quarter the mass that the Earth would have had if the Earth were Jupiter's size (and if you neglected the additional compression produced by the gravity of this enlarged Earth).

This meant that Jupiter was made up of materials that were on the whole only about one-quarter as dense as those that made up the Earth. That made it seem logical to suppose it consisted largely, if not entirely, of gaseous material.

In fact, it seemed that Jupiter was more like the Sun than like the Earth. It had about the same density as the Sun had, so perhaps it was made of Sun-material rather than of Earth-material. (As a matter of fact, this turned out to be right.)

Then, too, perhaps Jupiter was a tiny Sun. It might be hot — not nearly as hot as the Sun, to be sure, but still hot enough to be faintly luminous on its own. (From Earth's position between the Sun and Jupiter, we only see the Sunlit half of the planet, never the night side — at least not till the age of planetary probes arrived — so that we could not see whether Jupiter's dark side was faintly luminous or not.

At least two astronomers in the

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1870s strongly suggested that Jupiter was a tiny Sun and had its own luminosity. These were the German astronomer Hermann Karl Vogel (1841-1907) and the American astronomer Henry Draper (1837-1882).

This thought caught on among the more romantic followers of popular astronomy, and when I first started reading science fiction some sixty years ago, the hypothesis of a hot Jupiter (and Saturn, Uranus and Neptune as well) was quite prominent. For one thing it made the satellites of the gas giants more nearly habitable, and I believe I had the Jovian satellite Callisto warmed by a hot Jupiter in my early story, "The Callistan Menace."

It's not true, however. Jupiter is fearfully hot in its interior (as, to a lesser extent, is the Earth), but its surface is very cold and it has no luminosity of its own at all.

Contributing to the notion of a hot Jupiter was the most famous of all its markings, something that is now called "the Great Red Spot."

The first person who *may* have seen the Spot was Hooke in 1664, when he first reported markings on Jupiter. Cassini drew the Spot in 1672 and again in 1691.

There is some doubt about these 17th Century reports, for Jupiter's orb was not seen clearly with those early telescopes, and the descriptions were not quite like those that would be put forth now. It was not till the 1850s that telescopes were developed that were good enough to be relied on for studying Jupiter's surface markings.

The Spot was first seen clearly, and in detail, in 1878, by a German astronomer, Ernst Wilhelm Leberecht Tempel (1821-1889), who announced his discovery in 1879.

Tempel saw the Spot as a distinct brick-red in color. After a while it faded, sometimes to a pinkish-gray that is hardly noticeable. However, once seen it was never lost and could always be made out even when it was not very clearly marked off from the rest of Jupiter's surface. To Tempel it became the Great Red Spot, and it certainly has an unbroken history of a century and a quarter and, in all likelihood, one that is much longer than that.

The first thing to note about the Spot is its size. It is elliptical in shape, considerably longer from east-to-west than from north-to-south. Its long diameter is about 26,000 kilometers (16,000 miles), just twice the diameter of the Earth. Its short diameter is 14,000 kilometers (8700 miles) or just a little over the diameter of the Earth.

Its area is about 285 million square kilometers (110 million square miles). This means that it

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occupies a little less than half a percent of the total surface area of Jupiter, but on an Earthly scale it would be much more impressive. The Great Red Spot is a little bigger in area than the Pacific Ocean.*

At first, it seemed that the Great Red Spot had suddenly appeared in 1878, for how could it have been missed if it existed before, considering its startling reddish color. When, after a few years, it faded considerably, astronomers thought it might be a temporary phenomenon. It might be a lava flow, perhaps, something that was red hot to begin with and was cooling down somewhat. Or perhaps it was the mark where a rather large asteroid had struck the planet, or even more dramatic, where a new satellite was being born. The general impression, though, was that if it was a temporary phenomenon it was the sort of thing that ought to develop briefly, now and then, on a hot planet.

It quickly turned out, however, that the Spot had been seen in earlier times, perhaps even as early as Hooke's report in 1664. Then, too, while the color might fade, it would also brighten at times, and it could always be clearly made out whenever good telescopes were pointed at Jupiter.

It is a long-lived phenomenon then, and the feeling arose that it might be some kind of enormous and, at least, semi-permanent storm. This was confirmed once the Voyager probes studied Jupiter at close-range in 1979, just one century after Tempel's report of the Spot's existence.

Very likely the Spot is an upper atmospheric phenomenon and does not reach down into the heated lower layers of the atmosphere very far. There is a solid core to Jupiter, for the central layers seem to be made up of metallic hydrogen, and at the very center there may even be a relatively small glove of rock and metal. Such solid portions of the planet are far too deep to affect the Spot, however.

In analyzing the behavior of the Spot, then, we have to deal with the atmospheric circulation of Jupiter only. For instance, why is the Spot so long-lived? On Earth, similar cyclonic storms eventually move over land and lose energy, but on Jupiter, there is no land, and energy may be supplied it on a permanent basis.

Because of the rapid rotation of Jupiter, the predominant winds in the "temperate zones" are westerlies that seem to move at a rate of 650

The calculations in this paragraph were done in my head, and I haven't bothered to check them. This means I'm giving the readers a chance to check it themselves and correct me if I'm wrong. They always seem to enjoy a chance to do that.

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kilometers per hour (400 miles per hour), whipping the cloud formations into bands that run parallel to the equator.

These winds cannot be really steady, however. We know, from our studies of Earth's atmosphere that air movements tend to be chaotic and, therefore, unpredictable in fine detail. Jupiter's atmospheric circulation may be less complex than Earth's, since the temperature differences north and south are not as great as on Earth and because there is no land surface to complicate matters.

On the other hand, the greater speed and density of Jupiter's atmosphere makes for much more turbulence. It is not surprising, then, that changes in wind velocity may serve to move the Spot forward ahead of the general rotation at some times, and allow it to lag behind the general rotation at other times. The nature of the winds can also lengthen or shorten the long diameter of the Spot.

The strong westerly winds, however, keep the Spot firmly in place in its latitude. The Spot may drift east and west, but it never drifts north and south. Nor does its short diameter vary much.

One thing that is bothersome about the Spot, though, is the fact that it is asymmetrically placed on Jupiter. I suppose that in order to set up a vast storm, you need dense, rapid winds, and a strong Coriolis effect (the latter imparts a turning motion to the air, for reasons I'll take up in another essay someday, perhaps). The winds, I think, would be most rapid at the equator, but there is no Coriolis effect there. As one moves north or south of the equator, the winds slow down, but the Coriolis effect becomes larger, and at 20 South Latitude, it may be that the combination is ideal for producing a large storm.

But, then, there seems no reason for supposing that the wind systems are not symmetrical north and south of the equator. And in that case, why is there not a second Great Red Spot at 20 North Latitude? There just isn't and I don't think anyone knows why there isn't.

A second problem is the matter of color. Jupiter has surface colors of white, yellow, orange, brown, and reddish — but why?

The atmosphere is almost entirely hydrogen and helium, which are quite colorless. To be sure, there are also other components of Jupiter's atmosphere that exist in much smaller quantities — water, ammonia, methane, ethane, hydrogen sulfide and so on. It doesn't take much of some component to absorb part of the spectrum and color the atmosphere generally.

The trouble is that the known

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impurities wouldn't suffice to produce the particular colors that characterize Jupiter. There must be some substance, or substances, in the atmosphere that produces the color, but we just don't know what it is.

What's more, we don't know why the Great Red Spot, in particular, is the color it is.

There are other storms on Jupiter, some of which are quite long-lived (though nothing like as long-lived as the Great Red Spot) and some of which are quite short-lived. The long-lived ones tend to be white, while those that are reddish tend to be short-lived.

The whiteness of the long-lived spots doesn't seem to be mysterious. It is thought to be an upwelling of ammonia that freezes after emerging from the hotter lower depths, spreading into a layer of ammonia ice.

Presumably, the material in the short-lived, reddish spots is lifted up from still lower layers and has more of the unknown color-producing substance that colors Jupiter's atmosphere generally. It is brought up in differing amounts, which would account for the fact that the redness brightens and pales with time.

The mystery is why the Great Red Spot is both reddish *and* long-lived, and why there is only one of it.

Perhaps the Galileo probe, which is on its way to Jupiter, will be able to give us more information about Jupiter's atmosphere in general, and about the Spot in particular.

Would it help if we studied the other gas giants as well? Until the 1980s, this was impossible since Saturn, Uranus and Neptune were so far away that astronomers could not make out the details of their surfaces to any but the slightest degree, if at all.

However, Voyagers 1 and 2 skimmed by Saturn in 1980 and 1981, and Voyager 2 went on to visit Uranus in 1986 and Neptune in 1989. Astronomers got a close-up view of each of these gas giants.

The important thing about these farther gas giants is precisely that they are farther. This means that they get less energy from the Sun, and if it is solar energy that drives the atmosphere into turbulence, then it is to be expected that Saturn would be quieter than Jupiter, that Uranus would be quieter still, and Neptune the quietest of all.

If we set the amount of Solar energy received by Jupiter in a given unit of time over a given area of its surface, arbitrarily, as 33, then what Saturn gets is 10, what Uranus gets is 2.5 and what Neptune gets is 1.

Saturn has many puzzles about it. Although the second largest

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planet, it has only 3/10 the mass of Jupiter and is the least dense of the planets — indeed, the least dense object in the Solar system. Its density is only half that of the other gas giants. This means that it undoubtedly contains a larger percentage of hydrogen than the others do, but why? We don't know.

Saturn also has an enormously complex satellite system, and something quite unique in the form of a magnificent ring system, bright and huge, that makes it, by general agreement, the most beautiful object in the sky. The other giants also have rings, but those are thin, dark, and puny — almost contemptible. Why Saturn should be so richly endowed we don't know.

Saturn, though slightly smaller than Jupiter, takes a bit longer to rotate. However, it turns quickly enough to set up a strong wind circulation. What is missing is Solar energy. It gets less than one third the energy from the Sun that Jupiter does.

Its surface is a pale yellow, which presumably means that although it may have the same coloring material found in Jupiter's atmosphere, this material is frozen out to some extent (Saturn's visible cloud deck is at a lower temperature than that of Jupiter, of course) or is more effectively diluted by overwhelming quantities of hydrogen.

Saturn has storms on its surface, too, but Voyager 2 was only able to spot three of any size. They were oval, like Jupiter's Spot, and only faintly colored. The largest one was about 5000 kilometers (3000 miles) east and west and about half of that north and south. This makes it only about 1/30 the size of the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. It is a storm that is only (roughly) the shape and size of the United States.

Of course, since it was observed only by Voyager 2, we have no idea how long-lived it might be.

Uranus and Neptune are both blue planets. They are so cold that almost all the trace components of their atmospheres are frozen out. If there is the substance present that gives Jupiter and Saturn its color, it is ineffective in the outer gas giants. There the only gases of importance in the atmosphere are hydrogen, helium, and methane. Methane absorbs the red end of the visible light spectrum when present in quantity, and therefore reflects mostly bluish light. That is what gives Uranus and Neptune their colors. The two blue planets are very much alike in size and mass, and are virtually twin planets, as are Earth and Venus, closer to the Sun.

Uranus gets only 1/13 as much solar energy as Jupiter does and only 1/4 as much as Saturn. Therefore, if Saturn's surface is quieter

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than Jupiter's, Uranus's surface ought to be quieter still, and so it is. When Voyager 2 passed Uranus, what it saw was a calm, almost featureless surface.

Uranus has its puzzles, of course. Its axis of rotation is tilted 98 degrees to the plane of its orbit. This means that it is rotating virtually on its side and, since it revolves about the Sun in 84 years, almost every point on its surface, except for regions within 8 degrees of the equator, gets 42 years of "day" and 42 years of "night." All its satellites rotate about it along its equatorial plane so that they move up and down, so to speak, rather than left to right, and so do the ten thin rings of debris that surround the planet. Its magnetic field is oriented at an enormous angle to the axis of rotation. We don't know what causes these anomalies.

As Voyager 2 sped on to Neptune, astronomers were confident that Neptune would also be dead quiet. After all, it receives only 2/5 the Solar energy that Uranus does, only 1/10 that Saturn does, and only 1/33 that Jupiter does.

Their confidence turned out to be misplaced. Neptune was wild. Not only did it have an atmospheric circulation that was as turbulent as that of Jupiter (if not more so) but it had a "Great Dark Spot."

The Great Dark Spot has only about 1/8 the area of Jupiter's Great Red Spot, but that still makes it as large as Africa and Europe put together. It is just as large for Neptune's size as the Great Red Spot is for Jupiter's size.

What's more, the Great Dark Spot has the same shape as the Great Red Spot, and is located in the same place — 20 South Latitude. Here, too, there is nothing similar in the northern hemisphere.

There are differences, of course. Neptune's Spot is more loosely constructed than Jupiter's and wobbles more. Its color-contrast with its surroundings is not as great.

The great mystery, though, is why the Great Dark Spot is there at all. Where does the energy come from that maintains it? It can't be solar energy, so it must be the internal heat of Neptune rising to its surface. But why does it do so on Neptune and not on Uranus, which is its virtual twin.

More than ever, I am curious to know why there is only *one* great spot on Jupiter and on Neptune, and why it is located in the southern hemisphere and not in the northern — and why there is no corresponding object on Saturn or Uranus.

Isn't it delightful that the more scientists learn, the more fascinating and puzzling the mysteries grow?

NOTE: Since this was written, an enormous storm was spotted on Saturn, which temporarily spread a white cloud of frozen ammonia nearly all the way about the planet.

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Mary Rosenblum writes that after getting a BS in biology, she tried a variety of careers, including endocrine research, horse training, commercial cheese-making and a stint on the professional fair circuit. Since 1988 she has been writing full time, with stories in Asimov's *and* Pulphouse.

SPIRIT-DANCING ON THE EVERGREEN POINT BRIDGE

By Mary Rosenblum

LISA SEWIN HATED THE Evergreen Point Bridge. It had become a symbol of her life — a crawling bottleneck trapping her between *here* and *there.*

She leaned her forehead against the grimy glass of the bus window, squinting up the simmering line of stalled rush-hour traffic. Rising heat waves blurred the west shore of Lake Washington. It looked like a mirage — an unreal oasis that she would never reach. As Lisa started to straighten, something caught her eye.

An otter balanced on the rail of the floating bridge. It looked as if it had just climbed up out of the lake. Lisa's eyes widened. It was too small to be a sea otter. How had a land otter ended up on a bridge in the middle of Seattle?

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A pudgy, balding man climbed from one of the cars stopped beside the bus. He peered up the line of stopped cars, scowled, and leaned back against the rail within two feet of the otter. As the man unbuttoned his collar, the otter flattened its round ears and batted at the blue tie the man had slung over his shoulder. The man gave the traffic jam a final disgusted glance and stomped back to his car.

He didn't see the otter, Lisa thought, and felt a tiny chill. She might be sick — but not sick enough to be hallucinating. She couldn't be.

The creature sat up on its hind legs to comb its whiskers. Its sleek brown fur gleamed in the sun, and its muscular tail looked thick as Lisa's forearm. Lisa sneaked a glance at the skinny black woman sitting behind her. She was staring out the window in the direction of the otter, her face glazed with boredom.

As if it had somehow felt her unease, the otter grinned at Lisa. Its tongue curled out over its white teeth, and it sneezed.

Lisa looked away quickly. Grandmother would say that the otter was an Indian spirit. Grandmother saw spirits under every bush. She stared over the crush of heads and shoulders. Once, she had believed in Grandmother's spirits — when she was a dumb kid. Lisa yanked her creased skirt down over her knees. The bus smelled of sweat, diesel exhaust, and fatigue. It was an oven, hot enough to make anyone see things. That's what you get for skipping lunch, she told herself, but she didn't look out the window again.

The engine roared, and the bus jerked into motion. The sudden lurch sent Lisa's stomach up against the bottom of her esophagus. If she could afford to live in Bellevue, she wouldn't have to do this.

If wishes were horses. . . .

College had seemed like a bridge, too, leading from the reservation into that golden future. The land of equal opportunity — get off the reservation, away from the grinding nothing there, and you'd make it. She had believed that, too. I got stuck in traffic, Lisa thought. The future was still out there ahead of her, as wavery and unreal as the west shore of the lake had been. Her laugh stuck in her throat as the bus jolted to a halt at her stop.

Clouds had moved across the sun, unrolling a blanket of heavy humidity over the simmering Beacon Hill streets. Lisa's hair hung in lank black strands, and her blouse stuck to her skin as she plodded along the dirty

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sidewalks. The sun had frizzled the weedy grass in the tiny front yards of the decaying houses. Wary-eyed children played in the dusty shade, and old men perched on the sagging porches, spitting. Lisa climbed the cracked concrete steps to her apartment building, her legs aching with each step. She had started having cramps in her legs at night — bad cramps — that kept her awake for hours.

"Hey, Lisa." The voice came from the drooping shrubbery.

"Hello, Eric." Lisa paused reluctantly on the doorstep, hugging the meager strip of shadow cast by the building.

"It's cool back here." Her next-door neighbor grinned at her.

Sprawled in a sagging yard chair, book open in his lap, he waved, inviting her into the dusty shade between the screening evergreens and the grimy bricks of the building. Skinny and white-blond-fair, he had on a pair of ragged cutoffs, a red bandanna wound around his forehead, and nothing else.

"Did the druggies leave any needles back there last night?" Lisa asked sourly. "If Mrs. Culligan sees you, she'll evict you."

"She never comes out until dark. I think she's a vampire." Eric rolled his eyes. "No needles today. They're shooting up over in the park."

"How nice." Lisa leaned against the wall, grateful for the faint coolness of the shadowed brick.

"Did you go see the doctor today?" Eric shut his book and untucked his feet, his face suddenly serious.

"On my lunch hour." Lisa closed her eyes. "More tests," she said. "He said something about Epstein-Barr."

"Ye . . . ah." Eric dragged the syllable out doubtfully. "Did the calcium help the cramps?"

Lisa shrugged, not wanting to tell him that it hadn't. "I'm going to go take a bath," she said. It didn't feel like sickness, no matter what the doctor said. She was just tired, with a grimy, gray tiredness that soaked into her bones and drained her energy.

"Uh . . . I think there's someone waiting for you in the hall." Eric looked at her. "At least, she's sitting outside your door — she wouldn't speak to me. A woman in her sixties, with braided gray hair?"

"Oh God." Lisa leaned her forehead against the metal security grille bolted to the glass door. "Grandmother." Maybe her imaginary otter had been a premonition.

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"Uh-huh?" Eric's eyes gleamed. "She's impressive, but I don't think she likes me much."

Thank you, bigmouth Rosalie. Lisa rubbed her aching eyes. She hadn't written to anyone else back on the reserve. How else had Grandmother gotten her address? "Maybe the otter told her," she said bitterly.

"What's that? What about an otter?" Eric leaned against the wall. "Lisa, you look awful." His long face creased with worry.

"Thanks a lot." Lisa straightened with an effort. "I'm just tired, and I wasn't expecting company." Especially not Grandmother. She fumbled the door open and hurried into the dark lobby.

"I'll be glad when you hear back from the tests." Eric tagged after her, his long legs scissoring like a heron's. "I worry about you."

"Don't." Lisa started up the stairs. "I don't need anyone to worry about me."

Eric grunted doubtfully and followed her.

Sometimes Eric reminded her of a pesky puppy. Lisa ignored him, concentrating on making her tired legs work. The third-floor landing might have been on top of Mount Rainier, and it was hotter than the bus in the stairwell. She tried not to droop, aware of Eric's concern like a prodding finger in her back.

The small, shriveled woman sitting on the suitcase outside Lisa's door looked up at her. "Granddaughter," she said calmly.

Her eyes looked black as dried berries, and her silver hair hung down over her shoulders in two thick braids. She was wearing a blue flowered blouse and blue slacks. A carved amulet hung down between her slack breasts, suspended on a leather thong.

She hadn't changed in all the years Lisa had known her. It was as if Grandmother were one of her spirits — something sprung to life from a root or a stone. Lisa couldn't imagine her as a child.

"Hello, Grandmother." Lisa scuffed her feet on the faded carpet. She felt like she had back in grade school, opening the door to find Grandmother on the step and Mother already drunk, cringing at the shouting to come. "I didn't expect you," she managed.

"I'm sure you didn't."

"Hi." Eric stepped forward, smiling. "I'm Eric Ross, Lisa's neighbor." He held out his hand.

Her grandmother's expression didn't change, but the dried-berry eyes flicked sideways.

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Eric flushed pink. "Yeah," he said. "Well, it was nice to meet you." He looked at his outstretched palm as if he had just noticed it, wiped it on his cutoffs, and gave Lisa a lopsided smile. "See you later," he said. A moment later his door closed with a carefully casual slam.

"You were rude." Lisa felt guiltily relieved that Eric had supplied her with something to say.

"I had nothing to say to that white child." Her grandmother got to her feet in a single lithe motion. "Are you going to invite me in?" The black eyes pierced Lisa.

"I can't leave you in the hall." Lisa shrugged and unlocked the door, feeling sulky and childish at the same time. "Excuse the mess." She suppressed a twinge of embarrassment for the clothes piled on the unmade bed that doubled as a couch, and the dishes stacked on the drainboard in the closet-sized kitchen. Why should I feel embarrassment? she asked herself, and the guilty embarrassment twisted around on itself to feed her growing anger.

"So why did you come?" Lisa scooped up an armload of clothes, determined to meet her grandmother head-on. "What brought you down here?"

"You're so full of anger." Her grandmother clucked softly. "It was eating you long before you ran away from it."

"I didn't run away from anything." Lisa dumped the clothes onto the closet floor, sweating in the hot orange light that filtered through the paper shades. "I didn't have any future on the reservation." The heat was softening the lump in her belly, turning her knees loose and watery.

"Little Deer came to me in a dream when you didn't come back for your mother's funeral." Her grandmother's voice was coming from far away. "He told me that you had a spirit sickness. I think Little Deer was right."

"I don't have any spirit sickness, just a bigmouth friend." Lisa tried to laugh, but her lips felt numb, and her grandmother seemed so distant, too far away to hear. "I never believed in all that stuff," she mumbled.

"You've closed your heart." Her grandmother's voice came from far away. "You've turned away from who you are."

"No, I didn't," Lisa tried to say, but the words wouldn't come. Something hit her shoulder. She felt the shock all through her body, although it didn't hurt. I fell down, she thought dreamily, but it didn't seem very important. It felt so *good* to rest. A face swam into view, blurry and out-of-focus. Grandmother? Lisa squinted, and the blur sharpened into

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a round face with small ears and a whiskery grin.

An otter.

Lisa gasped, and the otter face dissolved into her grandmother's withered features.

"You fainted." Her grandmother laid wet coldness against the side of Lisa's face. "What frightened you just now?"

"Nothing. What is this?" she asked bitterly, pushing the wet washcloth away. "No deer-hoof rattle? No drums?"

"This isn't the winter dance, child. I don't need drums to know that you're sick." Her grandmother rocked back onto her heels, her face creased into furrows of worry. "I think it's good that I came."

"Oh stop." Lisa struggled into a sitting position. "I just fainted. That's all. I haven't eaten today." Her shoulder hurt where she had banged it on the floor, and she was furious at herself. This was just the kind of display her grandmother needed to set her off. "I've seen a doctor." A *real* doctor, she was tempted to add. Lisa got to her feet, fighting dizziness. Rosalie must have told Grandmother *everything*. "He's doing tests," she said.

"Will this white doctor give you a pill to cure a sickness in your spirit?" Her grandmother's eyes glinted.

"It's some kind of virus," Lisa said wearily. Forget it. She sighed and walked into the little kitchenette. You couldn't argue with Grandmother. "Coke?" she asked. "Or is that too modern for you?" The Cokes dewed instantly as she took them out of the refrigerator. The moisture beaded the rim of the cans like tears.

"I was worried when you ran away." Her grandmother opened the can with a tiny, hissing pop. "I was more worried when you didn't come back."

"I didn't run away; I just left. I was eighteen." How long had it taken Mother to notice that she had moved out? Lisa swallowed the soda. It made the dizziness worse, not better. "Why should I come back just to watch them shovel dirt onto a wood box? Or did you put Mother's body into a canoe?" She ran her finger around the top of the can, smearing the dew-tears into a watery blur. "I'm making my own future," she said tightly. "Anyway, it's not your business." She set her can down very carefully. "Not anymore."

"You're my granddaughter, like it or not." Her grandmother sighed and shook her head. "I can stay for only a few days. I hope that will be enough."

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It's already too much, Lisa thought. "I'll start something for dinner," she heard herself say. A few days. Oh God. She pushed her hair back from her sweaty face, feeling sick, tired, and trapped.

"YOU MEAN she's a shaman." Perched on the railing of the fire-escape landing, Eric was a pale, gawky shape in the reflected glow of the streetlights. "That's neat," he said meditatively. His skin smelled of grease from the restaurant where he worked.

"Call her whatever you want." Lisa squirmed sideways, but the old iron railing poked her back no matter how she shifted. It was past one, she didn't want to talk about her grandmother, and she was going to feel terrible tomorrow, but it was too hot to sleep in the stuffy apartment — or was it her grandmother's sleeping presence that was keeping her awake?

"I read a book about that last month — the revival of the spirit dances and the sweat lodges, and so forth." Eric sounded unexpectedly shy. "It's pretty interesting — sort of a mix among religion, psychotherapy, and medicine. I like the idea of treating the soul to treat the body." He banged his bare heels against the metal railing in a thoughtful rhythm. "I think that's what's wrong with Western medicine. We repair the body, but we forget its connection to the soul. I wish she'd talk to me." He sounded wistful.

"She won't." Lisa glared at Eric. "When did you get interested in all that stuff?"

"I've always been interested," Eric said too quickly.

Always, huh? "You'd see spirits, too, if they did to you what they do to the initiates at the dances. They smother you with blankets, toss you around like a sack of feed, hit you, make you swim in the ocean in winter. They don't always ask you if it's what you want to do."

She had been ten when they had grabbed Mother. Mother had been drunk. Lisa remembered her screaming at the two men and the woman. Her words had been slurred with the whiskey, and her hair had straggled around her face as they hustled her off.

"Don't start thinking that it's real." The old bitterness threatened to choke her. "It's all pretend — dance and drum, keep your eyes on the good old days, and it's O.K. to be a failure today. I know that the clock isn't going to turn backward. You got to make it on today's terms or forget it. And if you don't want to play, they turn their back on you," she said softly.

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Mother had lasted less than a month in the initiation. She had come to Rosalie's house, where Lisa had been staying, at six in the morning. *Come on*, she had said. She had a bottle in one hand and a fresh, raw scratch on her cheek. When Lisa had asked her what was wrong, Mother had slapped her across the face.

After that, Grandmother hadn't come to the house anymore. "If you don't want to dance, you can drink yourself to death or go out and fall under a log truck. Too bad." Lisa took a deep breath of the stale city air.

"I brought some fancy seltzer home from the restaurant." Eric was staring at her, his face enigmatic. "Want one?"

"Yeah." Lisa straightened with a jerk. "Yes, I do, Thank you."

As Eric leaned down to pick up the wooden doorstop that held the fire door open, his hair brushed her bare arm. Lisa shivered, goose bumps rising on her skin. You think you understand what I'm saying, she thought sadly, but you don't. We don't even speak the same language.

She stood in the open doorway to his apartment while he got the seltzer, leaning against the doorframe. His unit was identical to hers — one big room, a kitchenette, tiny bathroom, and a closet. He had left the lights off, and the room was filled with city-glow and shadow. Unlike her apartment, his was neat. The sofa bed was folded shut, and books lined shelves made of boards and concrete blocks. He was her age, but she always thought of him as years younger. Lisa listened to the clink of glass from the kitchen. He had wanted to make love with her for a long time. Once or twice she had been tempted, when she was feeling down and lonely and the whole universe had shrunk to the size of her grimy little apartment.

She hadn't done it. Lisa pulled her shirt away from her sweaty back. Going to bed with Eric would remind her too much of Mother. They had come through her bed one after another — hoarse, mumbling shadows that grunted and gasped in ways that made the skin prickle between Lisa's legs even when her stomach was tight with disgust. In the morning she would dress for school in the kitchen while they snored under the old blue blanket.

"Lisa? You still in this world?"

"Huh?" Lisa blinked, became aware of Eric standing in front of her, holding out a glass filled with ice. "I guess it's time for me to go to bed. Thanks." She took the glass, sipped at the cold, bubbly water. It tasted like cherries.

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The yellow glow from the windows cast Eric into silhouette. Over his shoulder, she could see a corner of the counter in his kitchen.

The otter was sitting on the counter, grinning at her.

In spite of the shadows and the dim light, she could see every whisker, every hair of its thick, sleek coat. It winked at her, its small ears folded flat to its round head. Lisa started, slopping cold seltzer over the rim of her glass.

"What's wrong?" Eric turned around. "What's that?" He took a step into the room.

"Nothing," Lisa said quickly. He sounded so hesitant. Had he seen an otter sitting on his sink? Lisa gulped a mouthful of the seltzer, and the bubbles pricked her nose, bringing tears to her eyes. It was gone now — it had never been there. "I told you I needed to go to bed," she said raggedly.

"Lisa, what's bothering you?" Eric stepped closer. "Do you need to talk about it?"

He was drinking beer. The sharp smell swept Lisa back to school mornings and the lumpy bed. She flinched as Eric started to put his arm around her.

He pulled back. "Sorry." His crooked smile didn't quite hide his hurt. "Let me know if you need a sympathetic ear."

"I will," Lisa said. Before he could say anything else, offer any more comfort that she couldn't accept, Lisa shoved the glass into his hand and fled.

She woke earlier than usual next morning. It was still gray dawn. A bird trilled, and Lisa smelled woodsmoke and cedar. For a sleepy moment, she thought she was in a longhouse, drowsing before the winter dance started. The drums pounded, and she stood on one of the wooden benches, peering over the fence of grown-up shoulders to see the dancers. The spirits touched their chosen ones, guiding their lives, guiding them safely around the fire as they danced and chanted their songs. It was mystery that had sucked them up; it was magic and power. Lisa stretched up onto her tiptoes, wanting a spirit to choose her, wanting to be one of the line of dancers sitting at the edge of the trampled dirt in their belts and beads, wanting to belong.

Then the drums turned into the rattle of a jackhammer, and the garbage truck rumbled down the alley. The dream faded, leaving a hollow emptiness in Lisa's chest. That had been a long time ago, before she under-

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The otter gave a thin, barking cry and leaped at Lisa's face.

stood why Grandmother sometimes took Lisa to live with her, before the grabbing and Mother's screaming in the street. She rolled over on her back.

A sudden weight tangled the sheets around her feet. Lisa gave a squeaking cry as the otter rose on its splayed back feet. It tucked its small front paws against its sleek belly and stared at her, almost eye-to-eye. It wasn't grinning this time. It looked . . . fierce.

It gave a thin, barking cry and leaped at Lisa's face. She screamed and grabbed at the sheet as the thick, muscular body landed beside her. The mattress shook as it bounced across her, knocking her pillow onto the floor. Huddled in the center of the bed, she watched it wide-eyed as it circled her, leaping from floor to bed to floor again in a streak of liquid brown motion. Four times it circled her, then it dived beneath the bed with a final twitch of its tail.

"So." Grandmother was sitting up in the green sleeping bag she had brought and insisted on using.

"What do you mean, *so*?" Lisa clenched her fists, willing herself to stop trembling. A dream? She had felt the mattress shake.

"I think your guardian spirit has chosen you." Her grandmother nodded. "That's good."

"Nothing chose me." Lisa clenched her teeth hard and swung her feet over the side of the bed. She flinched as they touched the linoleum, but nothing leaped at her from under the bed. "I was having a bad dream about otters. I hate otters," she snapped, and stomped across to the kitchenette to start water for tea.

"Land otter? Land otter is a very powerful spirit." Her grandmother followed her, tugging at her pink nightgown. "It can be mischievous and hard to control." She gave Lisa a sly, appraising look. "Perhaps land otter is just what you need."

"Grandmother, I've graduated from college."

"Does that mean you can't believe in what you see?"

"I . . . didn't . . . see . . . anything." Lisa turned the burner on under the kettle. "I don't believe in your spirits."

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"Is it better to believe in nothing? What *do* you believe in, Granddaughter?" The dry brown skin around her grandmother's eyes folded into a thousand fine wrinkles. "You can't turn your back on what you are."

"Do you mean that I can't be white?" Lisa said tightly. "What does it mean to be Indian, Grandmother? I have wide cheekbones, brown skin, and black hair. That's all I see when I look in the mirror."

"Skin is surface. Is that as far as you're willing to look?"

"What do you want me to be?" Lisa's voice shook. "Do you want me to be like Mother? Mother was Indian. You want me to lie around drunk, in bed with anybody with the price of a bottle? Is that what you want?"

"My daughter refused to accept herself." Her grandmother's face might have been a wooden carving. "I tried to help her, but she wouldn't let me."

"So you cut her off — because she wouldn't dance and see visions for you. You cut us both off." Lisa leaned against the sink, pressing the hard edge of the counter into the knotted ache in her stomach. "I have to go to work," she said.

"You are like a dead tree, Granddaughter, pulling down dark lightning." Her grandmother's voice was harsh. "I am trying to reach you, but you won't hear me, either."

"I think that you'd better leave. Today." Lisa turned off the burner beneath the whistling teakettle. Her stomach was seething, and even the thought of tea made her sick. Let Grandmother make her own tea.

Lisa stalked past her grandmother, grabbing underwear from her drawer. I stood up to her, she told herself, wanting to feel that she had won a victory. All she felt was tired. She dressed silently, eyes fixed on what was in her hands. It didn't keep her from feeling the pressure of her grandmother's stare.

The day didn't get any better. The bus sat for almost a half hour on the Evergreen Bridge. It felt stuffy, full of used air. Lisa stared out at Lake Washington's placid surface. There wasn't a breath of breeze, and the air felt heavy and tense. People around her kept talking about thunderstorms in the weather forecast.

This bridge is my life, Lisa thought bitterly. I'm stuck here, between the past and the future. If she even had a future. Nausea churned in her belly, and she nearly threw up in the aisle. She closed her eyes, nails biting her palms, imagining a lightning bolt striking the bridge, blow-

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ing the cars and the bridge and herself into bits.

You are like a dead tree — pulling down dark lightning. Her grandmother's words whispered in her ears.

Maybe I am. Lisa stared out at the lake, hating it, hating everything. Maybe I don't care. Maybe there was no point in caring.

Along this end of the bridge, water lilies clogged the surface like green scum. Lisa caught a glimpse of a shadow beneath the surface. It moved, sending sluggish ripples through the massed green leaves of the lilies. It looked big as a whale. Lisa's hatred vanished as suddenly as it had seized her, leaving her weak and vaguely fearful. The bus lurched forward, and the black whale-shadow vanished from her view. It was a seal, Lisa told herself. Some poor stupid seal found its way into Lake Washington.

It didn't look like a seal, but she didn't look back. The thundery air made her heart beat faster, and she was relieved when the bus began to pick up speed.

At work, her boss, Mrs. Sinclair, told her to restock the aquarium supplies. Lisa's arms shook as she picked up the cartons, and sweat coated her skin. The thick, stormy air clogged her lungs and made it hard to breathe.

You are a dead tree. . . .

I was right to tell Grandmother to leave, Lisa told herself as she lifted a carton of fish food from the hand truck. Grandmother didn't care — not really — not unless you were a spirit dancer, living like it was still the Washington Territory in the 1800s. I'm going to do better. Lips tight, Lisa transferred cardboard tubes of Colorbrite Fish Diet from box to shelf, lining them up neatly. The shelf below was crowded with china castles, ceramic divers, and treasure chests full of fake jewels.

Are you doing so much better? a little voice whispered in her head. Shut up, Lisa thought wearily. The voice whispered with Grandmother's inflection. I'll get there, she told it. Would she? The cardboard tubes scraped onto the shelf.

Claws scratched, and china clinked musically. Lisa jumped back with a gasp as two spired castles smashed at her feet. A moment later a thick, muscular tail swept the rest of the aquarium ornaments off the shelf. The crash sounded loud as a train wreck. Every head in the store turned, and a customer's dog began to yelp hysterically. Hands to her mouth, Lisa stared numbly at the wreckage.

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"What is going on here?" Mrs. Sinclair's heels tapped on the linoleum. "Oh my. . . . What happened?"

The words were mild, but the tone wasn't. "I don't know," Lisa mumbled. "They just . . . fell." She felt herself flushing, felt Mrs. Sinclair's skeptical eyes on her face. Oh shit, she wanted to yell. Can't you see that it was the otter?"

It lay on its back on the shelf, webbed rear feet waving in the air. It was grooming its thick tail with its clawed front paws, a mischievous gleam in its dark eyes.

It looked smug. Lisa's fists clenched.

"Lisa? Are you feeling all right, honey?" Mrs. Sinclair's foot tapped an impatient rhythm on the floor.

"I'm fine." Lisa started, tearing her eyes away from the otter's grin. Its teeth were pointed and white as a cat's. "I don't know what made everything fall," she faltered. "Maybe the shelf broke."

They both looked at the solid, perfectly level shelf. The otter winked at Lisa, and she scowled. Mrs. Sinclair's doubtful expression stiffened.

"Your work has been falling off these past weeks. I hope there aren't any more accidents like this." She bent to pick up half of a castle. Beneath the glossy paint, the china looked porous and white as a bleached seal bone. "I'll have to take this out of your paycheck," Mrs. Sinclair said briskly.

"I understand." Lisa blinked back tears.

"Lisa. . . ." Mrs. Sinclair looked down the aisle to where Roger was ringing up a customer's purchases at the cash register. "I know you were disappointed about not getting the assistant manager position." Her sympathetic expression looked bright and false. "Roger has worked in our White Center store. He has simply had more experience than you have. It had nothing to do with you personally."

Lisa fixed her eyes on her scuffed shoes. Yeah. Spaced-out Roger was a better choice than a dumb Indian any day. She had gotten the message, thank you. "It was an accident," she said tightly.

Behind Mrs. Sinclair's back, the otter bared its pointed teeth in a silent snarl.

"You've been an excellent worker. Up until now."

The warning came through loud and clear. "I'll be more careful." What do you lose? Lisa thought resentfully. I'm paying for it. Dropping to her

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knees, she began to pick up the broken pieces.

The otter skipped down from its perch and began to bound around her in circles. Lisa concentrated fiercely, trying not to look. Mrs. Sinclair was still watching her; she could feel it. What if she got fired? The sweat on Lisa's arms turned cold and clammy.

One, two, three, four. Four times the otter bounced around her, then it vanished. The broken pieces clattered into the empty carton with the sound of a deer-hoof rattle. Four was a powerful number. They carried the initiates to the spirit dances four times around the smokehouse. Lisa shivered.

The otter plagued her all day, until Lisa couldn't do the simplest task without making a mistake. Twice, Mrs. Sinclair asked her if she was feeling well, and Roger smirked when she knocked over a stack of boxed dog biscuits. He probably thought she was stoned. *He* was, often enough. Lisa carried a dented box into the back room, glad that Mrs. Sinclair had left for the day. The otter frisked along beside her, twining about her feet like a cat, hissing and showing its teeth.

It was Grandmother's otter. Eyes front, Lisa stode blindly forward, legs stiff and straight as a wooden puppet. She flinched with every step, half-expecting to feel fur.

The otter appeared suddenly on a stack of cat-food cases. It grinned down at her and twitched its whiskers.

Oh God. Lisa slumped onto a broken sack of dog food. "Please go away." She buried her face in her hands. "Please." Now I'm talking to it, she thought, and felt vaguely horrified. Her legs ached, threatening to cramp again. "What is happening to me?" she murmured. Tears blocked her throat, and her hair clung to her sweaty face.

"Lisa?"

Eric's voice? Lisa looked up, half-expecting to find herself waking up on the fire escape.

"Hi." It *was* Eric. He shuffled his feet in the doorway. "I saw your grandmother walking to the train this afternoon, and — well — I brought her here first." He gave Lisa a tentative grin. "I almost had to kidnap her."

"What?" Lisa got slowly to her feet, feeling numb. "You did *what*?"

"You've been so upset . . . I thought. . . ." Eric's lips tightened as he read her expression. "I think you ought to say good-bye to her," he said firmly. "I think it's important."

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"You don't know anything about it," Lisa raged at him. "Can't you just stay out of my life?"

"Then you wouldn't have any friends at all, would you?" Eric's face was pale.

The otter hopped onto a stack of cartons behind Eric and hissed at Lisa.

"I'm sorry." She looked away from Eric's face. "I know you were trying to help." I don't want your help, she wanted to yell at him. Just leave me alone — you and the otter, both. "Oh, never mind," she said, too tired to either fight with him or make up. She walked past Eric, out into the fluorescent glare of the store.

"You can sneak out a little early if you want." Roger leaned on the cash register. "The dragon lady won't be back in today, and I'll punch you out." His too-bright eyes slid from her face to Eric's.

"Thanks." Lisa clenched her teeth. If she stayed, Roger would start quizzing her about Eric and her love life. She couldn't handle Roger's meddling tonight. Lisa looked through the glass doors, spotting the spare, upright shape of her grandmother sitting in the backseat of Eric's beat-up green Datsun. Oh Lord, she really *was* there.

"There's a six o'clock train," Eric said. "I can wait and give you a lift home. I don't go on shift until seven."

"She's perfectly capable of waiting for a train by herself," Lisa snapped.

"O.K.," Eric said neutrally, and went around to his side of the car.

Lisa yanked the passenger door open with a screech of hinges.

"I let the boy give me a ride so I could talk to you." Her grandmother nodded from the backseat.

She looked so composed — like a carved Indian face from a souvenir stand, Lisa thought resentfully. A piece of pretend for the tourists. "We have nothing to talk about." She slid onto the seat and slammed the door hard.

Eric drove clumsily, as if the tension in the car affected even him. The air felt thick in Lisa's lungs, heavy and sluggish, so that it was an effort to breathe. The world felt . . . angry.

"Don't cut yourself off like this," her grandmother spoke up. "Don't let your anger build a wall around you."

"You keep saying that, but it doesn't mean anything." Lisa sat rigidly upright on the seat.

She focused on the road ahead, trying to block out her grandmother's

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presence. The water-level span of the Evergreen Bridge opened in front of the car — her private bridge to nowhere. "You always know best, don't you? — always the wise woman." Cold, angry words pushed up through her control. "Mother killed herself — she didn't fall in front of that truck by accident, and you know it."

"You have to blame someone, so you're going to blame me." For the first time, her grandmother sounded angry. The seat rustled as she sat forward. "I tried. If she had finished her initiation, she would have found escape from her drinking in the dance. Many have, but she wouldn't even try. No matter what I said or did, she wouldn't try." Her bony fist slammed down on the back of the seat. "Don't you try to tell me my failing, child."

"Why not?" Lisa twisted around to face her grandmother. "She needed your help, but you wouldn't help her — unless it was on your terms. When she quit spirit-dancing, you wrote her off." The layers of squashed-down anger had been pressing against the bottom of her throat like a scorching bubble. Now it burst, scalding Lisa's throat, crackling like electricity from her fingertips and the hairs on her head. "Why does it always have to be *your* way? Couldn't you see what was happening? She loved you, and you quit loving her. Nothing mattered to her anymore. Nothing. Not even me."

Ray, his name had been. Stringy and muscular, a sometime logger, so big in his hot red pickup. He'd been in and out of Mother's bed for a year, but he'd always looked at her with that half-smile that made her want to look down and see if her shirt was buttoned.

She hadn't heard him get up that morning. He moved like a cat. She had been pulling her T-shirt over her head in the kitchen, when his rough brown fingers had clamped down across her breasts. Come on, baby, he had breathed in her ear. I've got something for you. His erection had prodded her buttocks like a sharp stick, and his sour breath had choked her. . . .

Mother hadn't even woken up.

"She didn't give a damn about me," Lisa yelled into her grandmother's wooden face. "and it was your fault. Yours, yours, yours!"

The Datsun swerved and slowed, nearly throwing Lisa backward into the windshield.

"What the hell's going on?" Eric yelped.

For a confused moment, Lisa thought he was reacting to her words. Then she noticed the lake. Choppy waves slapped against the low bridge,

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tossing rags of white spume into the air. Spray showered over the lanes. Cars were slowing and stopping, wipers slapping.

"This is crazy," Eric muttered, peering through the windshield. "There's no wind at all, but it looks like a storm out there." The Datsun jerked to a halt.

The lake was erupting in peaks of gray water. Lisa could feel the car tremble, as if the huge concrete-and-steel bridge were shaking under them. Lisa looked at the chaos, her confusion growing. It was as if her rage had catapulted them into a different day.

"Let's get off the bridge." Eric looked over his shoulder and swore softly. "Too late now." They were blocked in. "We're going to have to walk," he said, and shoved his door open.

A man ran past them, moonfaced with fear. Eric pulled the seat forward and reached for Grandmother's hand. Lisa fumbled for the door handle. The bridge *was* shaking. She got slowly out of the car. Her exploding anger had emptied her, leaving nothing but a hollow shell. She leaned against the warm metal of the car, not sure what to do next. It was all happening too fast. She couldn't take it all in.

On the far side of the car, Eric yelled something at her. Lisa could see his lips move, but his words were lost in the hissing splash of water and the shouts as drivers abandoned their cars and ran for shore.

"Lisa?" Her grandmother appeared beside her. "You called this," she said, her face composed. "I feel Ia'k*im, the water demon, dark and angry." She gestured out over the lake. "Anger calls anger. Your mother threatened to leave the reservation with you if I didn't let her alone." She nodded, her eyes on the troubled water. "That was my excuse, but maybe I didn't try hard enough to make my daughter hear me. I was angry, too. Perhaps . . . the dancing wasn't the only way." Her eyes met Lisa's. They were faded and uncertain — an old woman's eyes.

"My God, Lisa." Eric darted around the hood of the car. "Are you both crazy, standing here talking? Come on." He grabbed Grandmother's arm as the bridge shuddered. "This thing feels like it's about to fall apart."

"Go with him," her grandmother said to Lisa. "What is called must be answered. I accept your blame." Her withered lips trembled. "I loved my daughter. I love you, Lisa." With an abrupt, almost casual gesture, she twisted her arm out of Eric's grip and ran lightly toward the center of the bridge.

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"She's nuts." Eric stared after her. "Look. The concrete's starting to crack." He glanced wildly back toward shore. "Oh shit," he said, and ran after her.

"Eric, wait!" Lisa grabbed for his arm, missed, and stumbled. A heavyset man in a mechanic's coverall staggered into her, knocking her back against the car. She gasped as her hip hit the fender. Too late. She shaded her eyes with her hand, but Eric and her grandmother had both disappeared.

Her grandmother had gone to face the Ia'k*im.

There were no water demons.

Earthquake, storm, Ia'k*im — did it matter what label you gave it?

She's going to die for me, Lisa thought, and a bright new anger jerked her upright. As if a curtain had parted, she caught sight of her grandmother and Eric both, weaving between the cars. The pavement shuddered under her feet, making her stagger. A crack zigzagged through the concrete rail, and Lisa hesitated. Turn back, shrieked the voice in her head. Turn back and get off the bridge before it's too late.

The bridge groaned and shuddered like a dying animal. Lisa heard screams as she fell to her knees. A deep grinding noise filled the air, drowning the screams. A woman ran past, dragging a small boy who kept looking back over his shoulder as they ran. The bridge was cracking apart. Eric was right. The noise grew in volume, and metal groaned.

Panting, Lisa struggled to her feet. There was her grandmother. She stood between cars, arms raised. She looked so small and frail — a tired old woman. Eric had disappeared. With a pang, Lisa searched for him.

I accept your blame, her grandmother had said. *I love you, Lisa.*

"You can't die for me," Lisa screamed after her. "It won't help. It won't help anything." She gasped and staggered as the bridge sagged, clutching at the bumper of a car as a rush of foamy water knocked her to her knees.

A shadow moved in the waves beyond the rail. On her knees in the surging water, Lisa watched it grow. It looked like the shadow she'd seen under the water lilies.

Ia'k*im.

She was outside, looking in at her grandmother's world — trapped on a bridge of her own building, with PetWorld on one shore and her grandmother on the other. Ia'k*im was in the middle, and she *had* called it. She felt the link between herself and the growing shadow like an umbilicus of rage.

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"Go away," she gasped. The cord that bound them together tugged at Lisa. "Go back to where you came from."

You can't talk to an earthquake or a storm.

The bridge shivered again, and her grandmother fell, crumpling like a doll. "No!" Lisa cried, groping her way through the knee-deep water. She could feel the dark rage of the shadow-shape. It was her own rage — betrayal, guilt, anger at herself because she was drowning in this sea of white faces, because she didn't belong anywhere. . . .

Had it been her grandmother's fault — Mother and Ray and the long, ugly years? The reservation's? The white man's? God's?

She couldn't see her grandmother at all. "You want *me*," Lisa screamed. "Me!" Her toe caught a chunk of broken concrete, and she fell, splashing onto her hands and knees.

The darkness wasn't wavering. Born of anger, it was her deaf twin, out of control. Like Mother had been out of control. Mother had summoned her own demon, and it had eaten her.

To control, you have to believe. Lisa closed her eyes, cold water lapping her thighs. You have to believe. "Otter," she whispered. Land otter was a powerful spirit — a shaman's spirit. She opened herself to belief, reaching for that child who had stood on the benches to watch the spirit-dancers. It was a long way away, maybe out of reach forever.

"Help me, Otter," she breathed. "Please."

Someone shouted in a wavering, panicky voice. As she opened her eyes, she caught a glimpse of her face in the hubcap of the car beside her. The bright metal bent her reflection, rounded her chin, suggested whiskers and furry, round eyes.

The bridge settled with a groan, and a chunk of the railing crumbled into the water. Terrified, Lisa tried to leap to her feet, found herself diving forward into the turbulent water instead. She panicked as she hit, but her sleek body cut the water cleanly. To her surprise, she felt muscular and in control. The water didn't frighten her anymore. Lisa bent her long back and arced into a smooth turn. A sweep of her tail sent her hurtling forward.

Tail?

I am an otter, she thought. It felt good — *right* — and she wasn't afraid. Some part of her wanted to doubt, but she squashed it down and out of sight. Her heart pumped blood and oxygen through her otter veins, and she sang a silent otter song in her head.

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The Ia'k*im was there under the bridge — a vague shape of no-light. Lisa swam toward it. How do you deal with a demon? Automatically, she began to circle it, driving herself through the water with her strange-familiar muscles.

Once, twice, three times she circled, webbed feet kicking hard.

The Ia'k*im gathered itself, grew a dark limb, and lashed out at her. Lisa's circle bent and warped. She needed air, needed it *now*. She faltered, and blackness grew in front of her eyes.

Run away, the doubting voice whispered. Run away quick, before it can eat you. You're dreaming. Wake up.

I ran away from the reservation, Lisa thought. Grandmother was right. She was still running away — from the reservation, from the memory of her mother, and from herself.

With a fierce kick, Lisa aimed herself straight into the center of the darkness. You don't get to die for me, Grandmother, she thought fiercely. This is my demon. Lisa squeezed her eyes closed as the darkness swallowed her. She was drowning. Her strokes were slowing, churning the dark water feebly.

The angry darkness felt . . . familiar. It's me, she thought hazily. It was like looking at yourself in a mirror, only *feeling* instead of seeing. The Ia'k*im was her — not a demon, not a monster.

The darkness of the Ia'k*im exploded into spinning fragments of light that whirled Lisa into the air, dizzy and half-blind. Water slapped her face. She choked and sneezed, pushing herself up onto her elbows. Her nose was full of water, and she was lying on the bridge deck.

I was an otter, she thought fuzzily. Or was I the Ia'k*im? Everything looked fuzzy and strange. Painfully, she got to her knees. The bridge wasn't shaking anymore. She pushed wet hair out of her eyes, and her hand came away bloody. Did I dream the Ia'k*im? she wondered, staring at the bright blood on her fingers.

She didn't want it to be a dream. Lisa pulled herself to her feet and straightened her shoulders, feeling fresh and new, as if she had been born only minutes before. The fever, the aches and weakness that had plagued her, had vanished as if they had washed away in the water of the lake. Lisa took a long breath, feeling stronger than she had in months. I *was* Otter, she thought. I drove the Ia'k*im away. If it had been a dream, she was willing to believe that it had been real. Maybe that made it real.

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"Lisa!" Eric splashed toward her, his arm around Grandmother. "Lisa, are you all right?" His eyes were round and wide. "It must have been an earthquake. My God, I thought the bridge was coming apart."

"An earthquake," her grandmother said softly.

"That's what they'll call it on the news.' Lisa met her eyes. Perhaps there were realities and realities. She and her grandmother had shared a different one than had the rest of Seattle for a few minutes. Maybe they still shared it. "I'm still not coming back to the reservation," Lisa told her.

"You accepted your spirit." Her grandmother gave her a sly smile. "Otter will help you find the proper path." She took off the amulet she wore around her neck and held it out to Lisa.

Uncertainty still clouded her eyes. Behind the shaman mask, her mother's mother was waiting for her to speak. Lisa looked down at the carved figurine on her grandmother's palm. It was a land otter, carved from a bear's tooth. One abalone-shell eye winked at her. Lisa picked it up suddenly and slipped the thong over her head. It fell down inside her shirt, smooth and startlingly warm against her skin.

"Can you stay for a few days longer?" Lisa asked her grandmother. She

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felt awkward and shy, as if she were speaking to a stranger.

"For a few days." She looked out over the calming water. "I can still learn," her grandmother said heavily. "Even if some lessons come late."

We both need to learn how to talk, Lisa thought. It wasn't going to be an easy lesson. They would have to talk about Mother. She took a deep breath of the cool air. It smelled fresh, washed clean of city-smell and smoke. She'd start looking for a better job as soon as her grandmother left. Maybe it wouldn't be what she wanted, either, but she could take her time to decide what *was* important.

Eric was looking past them both, his expression dazed. "I don't know what you're talking about, but there's a sea otter sitting on that car, and it's grinning at me. I think this is all a dream," he said weakly.

"Parts of it, maybe," Lisa said.

Grandmother looked shocked. Lisa listened to the sirens wailing onshore. Another hard lesson, Grandmother?

"It's Land Otter," she told Eric. "Someday I'll introduce you to Land Otter."

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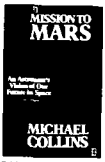

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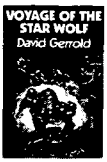

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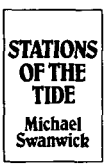

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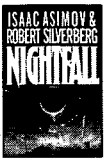

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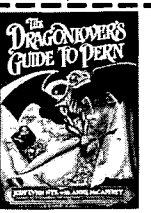

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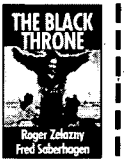

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